# SAINT GENET

"AN UNQUESTIONED MASTERPIECE"
—*LONDON TIMES*

ACTOR AND MARTYR

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

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## actor and martyr

*JEAN-PAUL*
**SARTRE**

TRANSLATED BY
BERNARD FRECHTMAN

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# TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

*The original title of the present work,* Saint Genet: Comédien et Martyr, *loses its allusiveness in English translation.* Saint Genet *evokes the memory of St. Genestus (known in French as Genest, or Genêt), the third-century Roman actor and martyr and the patron saint of actors. His career is the subject of* Le Véritable Saint Genest, *a tragedy by the seventeenth-century dramatist Jean de Rotrou. In addition, the word* comédien *(which means actor—not necessarily comic) is used familiarly to designate a person who shams or "puts on an act."*

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*The absence of reference to Genet's later plays is explained by the fact that Sartre's study was published in 1952, at which time* Deathwatch *and* The Maids *were the only works Genet had written for the theater.*

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# I

# THE METAMORPHOSIS

*Bandit, thief, hoodlum,*
*scamp!*
*It's the pack of decent folk*
*A-hunting the child.*
—PRÉVERT

## THE MELODIOUS CHILD DEAD IN ME LONG BEFORE THE AX CHOPS OFF MY HEAD

Genet is related to that family of people who are nowadays referred to by the barbaric name of *passéistes.** An accident riveted him to a childhood memory, and this memory became sacred. In his early childhood, a liturgical drama was performed, a drama of which he was the officiant: he knew paradise and lost it, he was a child and was driven from his childhood. No doubt this "break" is not easy to localize. It shifts back and forth, at the dictate of his moods and myths, between the ages of ten and fifteen. But that is unimportant. What matters is that it exists and that he believes in it. His life is divided into two heterogeneous parts: before and after the sacred drama. Indeed, it is not unusual for the memory to condense into a single mythical moment the contingencies and perpetual rebeginnings of an individual history. What matters is that Genet lives

* *Passéiste:* one who is not adapted to the present age, who is not a man of his time, who "lives in the past."—Translator's note.

and continues to relive this period of his life as if it had lasted only an instant.

To say "instant" is to say *fatal instant.* The instant is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after. One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life. One feels oneself to be one's own self and another; the eternal is present in an atom of duration. In the midst of the fullest life, one has a foreboding that one will merely survive, one is afraid of the future. It is the time of anguish and of heroism, of pleasure and of destruction. An instant is sufficient to destroy, to enjoy, to kill, to be killed, to make one's fortune at the turn of a card. Genet carries in his heart a bygone instant which has lost none of its virulence, an infinitesimal and sacred void which concludes a death and begins a horrible metamorphosis. The argument of this liturgical drama is as follows: a child dies of shame; a hoodlum rises up in his place; the hoodlum will be haunted by the child. One would have to speak of resurrection, to evoke the old initiatory rites of shamanism and secret societies, were it not that Genet refuses categorically to be a man who has been resuscitated.* There was a death, that is all. And Genet is nothing other than a dead man. If he appears to be still alive, it is with the larval existence which certain peoples ascribe to their defunct in the grave. All his heroes have died at least once in their life.

"After his first murder, Querelle experienced the feeling of being dead. . . . His human form—what is called the envelope of flesh—continued nevertheless to move about on the surface of the earth."

His works are filled with meditations on death. The peculiarity of these spiritual exercises is that they almost never concern his future death, his being-to-die, but rather his being-dead, his death as past event.

This original crisis also appears to him as a metamorphosis. The well-behaved child is suddenly transformed into a hoodlum, as Gregor Samsa was changed into a bug. Genet's attitude toward this metamorphosis is ambivalent: he both loathes it and yearns for it.

He lives in terror lest the original crisis recur; he fears it as one fears an attack of epilepsy. "Querelle could not get used to the idea, an idea never formulated, of being a monster. He would consider,

* The candidate for shamanic functions is killed by the spirits. His body is cut to pieces. Then he comes to life again. Only then is he a shaman. Almost all "rites of passage" center about death and rebirth. The theme of death and resurrection similarly governs all initiations.

would regard his past with a smile that was ironic, frightened and tender at the same time, insofar as this past merged with himself. A young boy who has been metamorphosed into an alligator and whose soul appears in his eyes might in like manner—if he is not quite conscious of his maw, of his enormous jaw—consider his scaly body, his solemn tail that slaps the water or the beach or grazes other monsters. . . . He knew the horror of being alone, stricken by an immortal enchantment in the midst of the living world."

The initial event determined Genet's inner climate, which will be horror.

"Few are the moments when I escape from horror, few the moments when I do not have a vision, or some horrifying perception of human beings and events."

This horror is both fear of past metamorphoses and terrified expectation of their repetition:

"A young Italian . . . was laughing and relating some trivial experiences. . . . I took him for an animal that had been metamorphosed into a man. I felt that, in the presence of this privilege which I thought he possessed, he could, at any given moment, turn me, by his simple wish, even unexpressed, into a jackal, a fox, a guinea fowl."

At every instant Genet fears "the miracle, that catastrophe of horror, horrifying as an angel . . . though radiant as the solution of a problem in mathematics, frighteningly exact." But the aim of these passages is to give poetic expression to his fear: it is not literally *true* that Genet is afraid of being changed into a jackal. In the following passage, however, he expresses himself almost without transposition. Genet, who is in the presence of a handsome young man, is afraid of dying:

"Which is to say that either I would become aware of being suddenly naked in a crowd which sees my nakedness; or that my hands would become overgrown with leaves and I would have to live with them, tie my shoelaces with them, hold my cigarette, scratch myself, open the door with them; or that he himself would know spontaneously what I am at bottom and would laugh at seeing me thus . . . or that I would see and feel my penis being eternally devoured by fish; or that a sudden friendship would permit me to caress toads and corpses to the point of orgasm, for when I evoke these—and other—torments, my death is in danger of being the knowledge of my shame which has appeared in the play of the manifestations most feared in the presence of the beloved being."

Note the connection between death and metamorphosis: "My

death is in danger of being the knowledge of my shame." "The child who is transformed into an alligator fears lest some gleam from the interior of his body or from his own consciousness illuminate him, hook on to his scaly carapace the reflection of a form and make him visible to men." When unmasked, he changes into himself. The metamorphosis that threatens him unceasingly is the constituent revelation that occurred one day through the mediation of others and that can recur at any moment.

And no doubt this myth is fed by ordinary and quite real worries. Having reached manhood, Genet, who considers himself a coward, is afraid of revealing his cowardice to his young lovers: "In the presence of the person I adore and in whose eyes I seemed an angel, here am I being knocked down, biting the dust, turning inside out like a glove and showing exactly the opposite of what I was."

As a professional thief, he is quite simply afraid of being caught: "A little old woman said to him quietly, 'What have you stolen, young man?' . . . a new universe instantly presented itself to Darling: the universe of the irremediable. It is the same as the one we were in, with one peculiar difference: instead of acting and knowing we are acting, we know we are acted upon . . . the order of this world—seen inside out—appears so perfect in its inevitability that this world has only to disappear."

But the striking thing is that the erotic humiliations of a homosexual and the occupational risks of a thief are tinged with an aura of the sacred. Confronted with a trivial, everyday event, Genet is "turned inside out," "like a glove"; the whole world is involved, one touches the ineluctable. These erotic and occupational accidents have a meaning which transcends them, and, as has been said of love, "They are much more than what they are," because they manifest the "immortal enchantment" that begot a monster and killed a child.

These metamorphoses fascinate him. He fears them and lives only for them. Apart from these brusque changes of Being, nothing in the world interests him. Having died in boyhood, Genet contains within him the dizziness of the irremediable, he wants to die again. He abandons himself to the instant, to the cathartic crises that reproduce the first enchantment and carry it to the sublime: crime, capital punishment, poetry, orgasm, homosexuality. In each case we shall find the paradox of the before and after, a rise and fall, a life staked on a single card, the play of the eternal and the fleeting. The very images and the words that designate them are of the same nature: from the bright scaffold spring roses, "lovely effect of

death"; from the "ebony prick" spring white flowers, death and flowering of pleasure; a decapitated head falls from the guillotine, a black member shrivels and droops. If metamorphosis is a death, death and pleasure are metamorphoses.

Thus, Genet lives outside history, in parentheses. He no more cares about his individual adventure—which he contemptuously calls "the anecdote"—than did an ancient Egyptian about his national history. He deigns to take notice of the circumstances of his life only insofar as they seem to repeat the original drama of the lost paradise. He is a man of repetition: the drab, slack time of his daily life—a *profane* life in which everything is permissible—is shot through with blazing hierophanies which restore to him his original passion, as Holy Week restores to us that of Christ. Just as Jesus does not cease to die, so Genet does not cease to be metamorphosed into a foul insect: the same archetypical event is reproduced in the same symbolic and ritual form through the same ceremonies of transfiguration. To Genet, as to the faithful of a religious community, sacred time is cyclical: it is the time of Eternal Recurrence. Genet *has been,* he *has lived.* As for the event that determined his fate, it has long since ceased to be a memory and has entered the category of myths, so that what has been written about the mentality of the primitive might be applied to Genet word for word: "What we might call [his] 'history' is reduced exclusively to the mythical events which occurred *in illo tempore* and which have not ceased to repeat themselves from that time until ours."* Genet has no *profane history.* He has only a sacred history, or, if one prefers, like so-called "archaic" societies he is continually transforming history into mythical categories.

If we wish to understand this man, the only way to do so is to reconstruct carefully, through the mythical representations he has given us of his universe, the original event to which he constantly refers and which he reproduces in his secret ceremonies. By analysis of the myths we shall proceed to re-establish the facts in their true significance.

Genet is seven years old. The National Foundling Society has placed him in the care of Morvan peasants. Adrift in nature, he lives "in sweet confusion with the world." He fondles himself in the grass, in the water; he plays; the whole countryside passes through his vacant transparency. In short, he is innocent.

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* Cf. Eliade, Mircea, *The Myth of the Eternal Return.*

This innocence comes to him from others—everything comes to us from others, even innocence. Grownups never weary of taking stock of their belongings: this is called regarding. The child is part of the lot, between two stools or under the table. He comes to know himself through their regard, and his happiness lies in being part of the stock. To Be is to belong to someone. If property defines Being, the quiet, sober steadiness of earthly possessions defines the Good. Good as good soil, faithful as a spade, as a rake, pure as milk, Genet grows up piously. He is a good little boy, a respectful and gentle child, weaker and smaller than his playmates, but more intelligent. He is always at the head of his class. In addition, he is serious, thoughtful, not talkative, in short, as good as gold. This Good is simple: one has parents whom one worships, one does one's homework in their presence, and before going to bed one says one's prayers. Later, one likewise becomes an owner of things and one works hard and saves. Work, family, country, honesty, property: such is his conception of the Good. It is graven forever upon his heart. Later on, despite the fact that he steals, begs, lies, prostitutes himself, it will not change. The local priest says that his is a religious nature.

This child is the victim of a cruel hoax. If you say to adults that they *are* innocent, they get annoyed, but they like to have *been* innocent. It is an alibi, an occasion for sentiment, a pathway to resentment and all forms of *"passéiste"* thinking, a ready-made refuge for times of misfortune, a way of asserting or implying that one was better than one's life. The myth of childhood innocence is a bastardized, positive and convenient form of the myth of Paradise Lost. As saints, intercessors and vestals of this pocket religion, it is the function of children, from the age of one to ten, to represent for grownups the original state of grace. Many of them find it to their advantage to become these sacred vessels, in particular those who are very secure, for example, the eldest of large families. But there are some whose actual situation contradicts the mythical virtues with which they have been adorned. Genet is one of these. He was given to believe, as were all the other village youngsters, that his soul was white; he therefore sees himself as white. Or rather, he sees nothing at all, but takes the grownups' word for it: they are able to discern his secret snows. This modest pride is going to determine his destiny: it consecrates, without his suspecting it, the priority of the object over the subject, of what one is to others over what one is to oneself. Nevertheless, the fact is that he *lives* his innocence, that he enjoys it, that it makes him happy. It would be

wrong to paint Genet's childhood in colors that are too dark since he has been careful to inform us himself that it was the most beautiful period of his life.

And yet, from this moment on he lives in a state of uneasiness. The pious and lawful vocables which he has been made to learn are not quite applicable to what he is and what he feels. But as he possesses no others, he can neither describe nor define his malaise. Unnamed, unnamable, marginal, unexpressed, this anxiety, which is faceless and without consistency, seems to him a negligible mood. Genet *does not perceive it.* Yet it expresses his deepest reality, which is contradictory, for his self-certainty contradicts the truth that he is for others. Innocent *in general,* he senses that he is suspect in particular. He is obliged, by error, to use a language which is not his own, which belongs only to legitimate children. Genet has neither mother nor heritage—how could he be innocent? By virtue of his mere existence he disturbs the natural order and the social order. A human institution with its birth register and its bureaucracy has come between the species and himself. He is a fake child. No doubt he was born of a woman, but this origin has not been noted by the social memory. As far as everyone and, consequently, he himself are concerned, he appeared one fine day without having been carried in any known womb: he is a synthetic product. He is obscurely aware that he belongs legally to administrative bodies and laboratories, and so there is nothing surprising in the fact that he will later feel elective affinities with reformatories and prisons. Being a fabricated creature, he will find his truth in sophism; being a child of miracle, he will be mineral or spirit; but he does not belong to the intermediate kingdom: to life. He will never care for sports or physical pleasures; he will never be gluttonous or sensual; he will never have confidence in his body. For want of having known the primordial relationship with naked flesh, with the swooning fertility of a woman, he will never have that tender familiarity with his own flesh, that abandon which makes it possible for others to reproduce within themselves and by themselves the indissoluble intimacy of mother and nursling. He is said to be "contrary to nature." But the reason is that, as far back as he can remember, nature has been against him. We others who issue from the species have a mandate to continue the species. Genet, who was born without parents, is preparing to die without descendants. His sexuality will be sterility and abstract tension.

How does the little boy foresee his destiny? I cannot say, but

there is no doubt that he already lives it in advance. Since his earliest childhood, the unknown mother has been one of the chief figures of his mythology. He both worships and hates her, smothers her with kisses and seeks to debase her. He is still fairly young when he addresses the Mettray Reformatory as if it were his own mother; he imagines that it appears to him "with all that is peculiar to women": tenderness, slightly nauseating stale smell emanating from the open mouth, deep heaving bosom, in short everything that makes the mother a mother. In short, the Mother Goddess, fertile and bountiful; better still, nature personified. Later, in his books, woman will appear only as mother. Genet disregards girls, except to turn them over to his handsome murderers who casually slaughter them. In fact, he peoples his works with guilty women whose children are dead and who mourn triumphantly, and if at times we do encounter amorous females in their forties, they too are mothers, incestuous and sacrilegious mothers, for they are laid by young lovers who could be their sons. But the theme of the "guilty mother" seems to be of recent origin in Genet's work. When he referred to the Reformatory in the past, that big woman was simply severe. At the beginning, *he* was the guilty one. Whenever the child tries to reach beyond the bureaucracy of which he seems an emanation to his true origins, he finds that his birth coincides with a gesture of rejection. He was driven out the very moment he was brought into the world. Later, it is all of society that will cast him out, but this social rejection is latent in the maternal rejection. The child senses that a woman tore him from herself, alive, covered with blood, and sent him rolling outside the world, and he feels himself an outcast. Ever since his birth he has been the unloved one, the inopportune, the superfluous. Undesirable *in his very being,* he is not that woman's son but her excrement. And we shall see how insistently, with what masochistic pleasure, Genet will later compare himself to filth, to a waste product. Psychoanalysts have observed that children often feel a parent's death to be a condemnation; the mother goes away so as no longer to see her unnatural son. The abandoning of a child signifies an even more radical condemnation! Is it a mysterious sentence that is punishing him for having committed the crime of being born? Is it a prophetic verdict that is making him pay in advance for future crimes? In any case, the judge is unknown, the child is ignorant of the charges and of the law, but the condemnation attacks his existence itself and eats away at it. Beneath the supposed innocence that adults have conferred upon him is hidden a sense of elusive guilt. Being nobody's

son, he is nothing. As a result of his fault, disorder has wormed its way into the beautiful order of the world, a crack has appeared in the fullness of being.

Being nothing, he possesses nothing. Whether judged from the viewpoint of Having or that of Being, he is equally at fault. He knows that he does not quite belong to his foster parents, that the public authorities have loaned him to them and can take him back, and that consequently nothing his parents own belongs to him. For others, things are warm, alive, elastic, but if he takes them in his hands, they die. He can name them, count them, even try to use them, but their dense opacity becomes an absence; it is to the others that they address their homey smile. If, later on, in the presence of the handsome young men who fascinate him, he re-experiences that strange impression of being *kept at a distance,* it is because it has never left him: "Whenever I was close to an object he had touched, my hand would stop three inches from it, with the result that things, outlined by my gestures, seemed extraordinarily inflated—bristling with invisible rays or augmented by their metaphysical double—to my now sensitized fingers." It is the material possession of things that is forbidden him, and his life will be a long effort to dematerialize them, to construct with air their metaphysical double, which is all he can possess.

Of course, he is neither cold nor hungry. He is given board and lodging. But there's the rub—he is *given* them. This child has had more than enough of gifts. Everything is a gift, including the air he breathes. He has to say "thank you" for everything. Every minute a gift is put into his hands at the whim of a generosity that leaves its mark on him forever. Every minute Genet moves a little further away from his foster parents. All this bounty *obliges* him to recognize that they *were not obliged* to adopt him, to feed him, to take care of him, that they "owed him nothing," that he is *obliged* to them, that they were quite free not to give him what he was not free not to accept, in short, that he is not their son. A true son does not have to display his gratitude. He draws from the family purse, and it is his father's duty to bring him up. Deprived of everything through the kindness of others, Genet will later express his hatred of all generosity toward inferiors:

"Madame is kind! Madame adores us. She loves us the way she loves her armchair . . . like her bidet, rather. Like her pink enamel toilet seat. And we, we can't love each other. . . . Filth doesn't love filth. It's easy to be kind, and smiling, and sweet . . . when you're beautiful and rich. . . . But what if you're only a maid?"

A lady once said to him, "My maid must be pleased. I give her my dresses." "That's nice," he replied, "does she give you hers?"

Castoff of a society that defines being by having, the child Genet wants to have in order to be. However, the normal modes of appropriation are denied him. He will obtain nothing by purchase, nothing by heritage. The gift accords him a relative and provisional being but enslaves him forever to his benefactors. There remains work. But his work at school is also a gift: he *receives* general education just as later he will *receive* technical education; they want "to make a man of him." He helps in the fields, he helps at home. But this unproductive help confers no rights upon him. It will never pay for the care he is given; it is merely the expression of his gratitude.

A vicious circle. One might say about the little Genet what Rougemont has said about Don Juan: that he *is* not enough in order to have—and also the opposite: that he *has* not enough in order to be. Different circumstances might have broken the circle, might have dissociated being from having: had he been placed in a working-class home, had he lived in an industrial suburb of a big city, had be been accustomed, at an early age, to hearing the very right of ownership challenged, or had his foster father worked in a nationalized branch of industry, he might perhaps have learned that one *is* also what one *does*. But—height of misfortune—he had to be sent into the fields. Those who provided him with the first image of man were landowners. To that stern, that mineral race, the farmer and his land form an indissoluble couple: one *has* the property because one *is* the legitimate heir, and, vice versa, one *is* shaped by what one *has*. The peasant acquires the silent immobility of his field. Our future burglar starts by learning absolute respect for property.

How will this abstract child react to his double exile? By a miming of being and having, in short, by playing games, like all children. He will have two favorite games, saintliness and pilfering. Insufficiency of being prompts him to play the former, and lack of having, the latter.

Saintliness first. He is already fascinated by this word, which he will later call the most beautiful in the French language. Though he does not yet dream clearly of becoming a saint, he feels that a man is not worth much if he does not live on grasshoppers, if he does not die at the stake with a smile on his lips. This exaltation betrays his secret disorder. It is not unusual for young boys to have extreme tastes, for them to want to be perfect, to be every-

thing, to be first in everything, but if they want to become great captains or great doctors, it is in order to be great among men and of a greatness recognized by men. In Genet's mysticism, however, we discern a rejection of the human order. An abandoned child, he takes revenge by admiring the children who abandon father and mother to follow Christ. It pleases him that the saints are answerable only to God, that they long to wrest themselves from the species and that they go counter to their most legitimate desires in order to achieve within themselves an anti-nature. His contempt for his body makes asceticism easy for him. For the same reasons we shall later see him make of love a form of torture. But, above all, he asks God to give him the rightful existence that men deny him. He derives at least one advantage from his orphan's solitude: his inner life is not socialized. No gaze disturbs his original privacy. A mother claims to know everything, she makes her child feel that she can read his mind, he thinks he is never alone. One evening, at dinner, it suddenly occurred to a little girl that her mother was silly. The child blushed to her ears and left the table, convinced that her parents had *heard* her inner voice. For a long time, our wicked thoughts will seem to us to be public knowledge; for a long time, we shall lie to others to the very depths of our being. But no family ceremony has consecrated Genet's union with his social image. Alone, without words, without a secret witness, he lives with himself in a state of concubinage. This solitude will later be mated; he will talk to *himself,* will worship *himself,* reinventing for his own use the archaic myths of the double and of the twins. For the time being, he takes it into his head to elect God witness to his secret life. God compensates for the absent mother, for indifferent Society. In becoming an object of concern to an infinite being, Genet will acquire the being which he lacks. He will be a saint, since he is not a son.

Another and even more amusing game: from time to time God turns his head away; whereupon soft, silent, unperceived acts flow from the child. Thefts. The budding saint robs his foster parents and sometimes their neighbors. He robs them in all innocence, without remorse and without shame, and without ceasing to want to be a saint. In his eyes this petty pilfering does not count. He is hardly aware of what he is doing; his hands simply wander. Moreover, his foster mother wasn't shy about filching. She was an "honest woman," of course, and remained honest while stealing. Honesty is an eternal essence which is not dimmed by accidental lapses.

Besides, it is unimportant who suggested to him his first thefts; it is unimportant whether he first stole alone or with playmates.

The essential point is that he thinks less of stealing than of engaging in imaginary experiments in appropriation. He experiments, as scientists say, "just to see." He is feeling his way with the aim of establishing forthwith a possessive relationship with things. Since an owner is a man who can use a thing without having to say "thank you," Genet will lay hands, in secret, on personal effects, tools, trinkets—in secret, so as not to have to thank anyone. He will use them in solitude. But *using* is, in this situation, only a means of possessing. The aim is not merely to take the object but also to assume the familiar, expert, offhand attitude which will indicate, to invisible witnesses, that he is its real owner. The servant girls Solange and Claire* do not rob Madame. They put on her dresses when she is out, they adjust them, drape them, they primp and preen; they admire themselves in the mirror, they receive the real caresses of the silk and satin as an investiture. Their sensations and gestures designate them, in their own sight, as Madame. It is Madame's reflection that they see in the mirror, and each in turn becomes more servantlike so that the other may feel more mistress-like. It is only a game. But should the dress be spotted, should it be burned by an ash, the imaginary using of it will end in real consumption: they will roll it up, carry it away and destroy it—and thus become thieves. Genet moves from game to theft with the same fatality. It is highly significant that his first acts of larceny did not spring from hunger and covetousness. These are needs that care not a rap about mine and thine, that demand simply to be satisfied. Under their pressure the hungry man challenges, provisionally or definitively, the right of others to possess. In the case of Genet, however, his thefts, far from challenging property, affirm it. This child who has enough to eat but whom society keeps at a distance wants, by means of a solitary act, to integrate himself into the community. He is aiming at the impossible. His austere and feverish quest for Being involves an imaginary satisfaction only. Thus is born that most peculiar nature which carries out a real operation whose aim and meaning lie in unreality.

The act is performed in two stages. The first does not count for anyone, not even for the one who commits it. The mind clouds over, everyone dies then and there, even the little thief. "The culprit is your hand."† In the absence of human creatures, a hand moves in the desert. When the people come to life again, nothing

* In Genet's play *The Maids.*
† Cocteau, *Anna la Bonne.*

has changed, except that there is a hundred francs less in a purse and a hundred francs more in a pocket. The second moment, on the other hand, requires the most intense consciousness: Genet begins his spiritual exercises. Outcast of a consuming society, the rites which he celebrates in secret reproduce the cardinal act of the society that excludes him: he sacrifices, he consumes, that is, he destroys. An object goes up in smoke, a piece of fruit melts in his mouth, his pleasure blossoms and fades, it is going to die. It is this process of dissolution that constitutes the entire ceremony. By a fictive communion he touches, on this stolen food, on this evanescent and stealthy pleasure, his imaginary being as fair-haired-boy-rightfully-possessing-the-fruits-of-his-earth; he eats it. Like "the youngster too vacillating to be included in the breed . . . who turned in on himself in the form of a slice of bread smeared with soft cheese, already the snow of peaks, the lily or other whiteness constitutive of inner wings,"* he turns in on himself, he rewards himself. The pleasure is real. Real, too, the chewing and swallowing. But their reality is of no interest in itself; it is there only to lend a body to the desperate efforts of appropriation. The important thing is to use these real facts as symbols. The legitimate owner puts out his hand, picks a piece of fruit and eats it peacefully. Genet transfers to himself the owner's gestures and sensations so as to identify himself with the latter by an effort of mind. He takes in order to convince himself that he has the right to take; he eats as an actor eats on the stage; he is playing at possession; he embodies the owner as Barrault embodies Hamlet. However, he makes, at the same time, a considerable effort to be his own audience so as to catch himself in the act of possessing. Need I say that he is always about to succeed but never does? It doesn't matter. He already finds within himself what the Marquis de Sade called the "principle of delicacy," which makes him prefer nothingness to being, imagination to reality, tension to enjoyment. In short, his operation clearly falls into the category of poetic acts: it is the systematic pursuit of the impossible. No wonder that he wrote later that "the land of the Chimeras is the only one worth inhabiting" and that he quoted the following line from Pope: "Nothing is beautiful, save that which is not."† But what appears with the first thefts is not only that straining of the soul toward something beyond the true which will henceforth characterize Genet's inner tempo, but also the particu-

* Mallarmé: Poèmes en prose. Réminiscence. *Œuvres complètes* (Pléiade), Paris, p. 278.

† This is not Pope's line but a translation of Genet's misquotation, from memory, of a French rendering.—Translator's note.

lar nature of his poetic procedure. He never dreams. He does not turn away from the world in order to invent better worlds, he does not abandon himself to images, to musings. His imagination is a corrosive operation that is practiced *on* the real, an operation aimed not at evading but at transcending reality, and, as we have seen, at dematerializing it. Other children would have played at ownership with imaginary belongings. A pebble would have been a gold piece. They would have made believe they were buying or eating. But our little thief wants to eat "for real," wants to have *real* pleasure in his mouth. Only, this real pleasure is neither wanted nor felt for its own sake; it is in the service of an impossible attempt to coincide, in the realm of the imaginary, with the essence of an owner of things. As a result, the whole system is derealized, the very enjoyment becomes imaginary. The true pleasure of a thief becomes a fictive pleasure of a fake owner. Reality is worn so thin that one can see the light through it. To imagine is to give the imaginary a bit of the real to chew at. For this reason, Genet will be able to say of the chimerical Ernestine: "She never left reality." No imaginary without reality. It is in the movement of the real to annihilate itself that the pale shadows of the imagination are embodied. And thereby, despite all the differences which we shall point out later, Genet's thefts are not so far removed from the object-poems produced by surrealism, the inner contradiction of which represents the pure instant of the falling away to nothingness, through which can be perceived the eternal absence of another world.

The thefts spread and multiply. Genet now robs neighbors. There is no more effective defense against the temptation to have *everything* than to own something. If you have only a crumb that has fallen from the table, your life will be spent in defending that crumb, in convincing others and yourself that it is the best of crumbs and that, in the last analysis, it contains the universe. Genet has nothing, which amounts to saying that he has an eminent right over everything. At this point there begins the systematic turning of the positive into the negative and the negative into the positive which later, carried to an extreme, will lead Genet to "saintliness." In the "land of the Chimeras," a conversion of signs is sufficient to change penury into wealth. This pariah whom the world rejects is secretly pursuing the eminent possession of everything.

We have all known the kind of bright, healthy child with "winning gaze" and "frank smile" whom everyone takes for a little angel. One day we realize that he steals things. At first we simply

can't understand, he seemed so nice! And then we feel personally offended. He fooled us, he's a little hypocrite. We start regarding his virtues as crimes; he assumed the appearance of honesty the better to deceive us.

We do not perceive the air-tight partition that separates his virtues from his pilfering. We do not see that he lives on two levels at the same time. Of course Genet condemns theft! But in the furtive acts he commits when he is all alone he *does not recognize* the offense which he condemns. He, steal? When what he is trying to do is to win, in defiance of destiny, a regular status, parents, property, when he is attempting to diminish his secret guilt and draw nearer to those whom he admires? What is he really seeking? To *be like others,* nothing more, and precisely because others are good and just, because they are right to be what they are. The truth is that he is impelled by anxiety. At times he feels obscurely within himself a kind of budding anguish, he feels that he is about to see clearly, that a veil is about to be torn and that he will know his destitution, his abandonment, his original offense. So he steals. He steals in order to ease the anguish that is coming on. When he has stolen the cakes and fruit, when he has eaten them in secret, his anxiety will disappear, he will once again find himself in the lawful and sunlit world of honesty. His conduct is not to be regarded as sneaky. He is really and truly well-behaved and virtuous, and there is only one life that counts for him, the one he leads in the presence of adults. Outside that life there is only a bad dream, a kind of nameless nightmare in which he sometimes feels he is going to be unhappy and from which he awakes very quickly, an obscure menace against which he has invented two exorcisms, the game of saintliness and that of stealing. I would compare this childish magic, which operates at the frontiers of nothingness, of sleep, to the fantasies of onanism rather than to anything else. To the child who steals and the child who masturbates, to exist is *to be seen by adults,* and since these secret activities take place in solitude, they *do not exist.* The truth is that little Genet has been taught an ethics *that condemns him.* He believes in it with all his soul, but by the same token he destroys himself, for this ethics of ownership casts him doubly into nothingness, as ragamuffin and as bastard. This is the key to his conduct and state of disturbance. In broad daylight he is luminous, honest, happy, but the more he asserts his happiness in the light, the more he ruins and tortures himself in the darkness. He is going to reduce himself to despair. If he steals, if he dreams of saintliness, it is not in defiance of peasant ethics, but because of

it. He has recourse to this double compensatory activity because he is unable to liquidate a system of values that denies him his place in the sun.

Shall I say he is unhappy? Not yet. In fact, one should emphasize the optimism and will to happiness that characterize this child in the depths of his heart. Not for a moment has he wanted to believe that there was no way out of the situation. Not for a moment does he imagine that he is condemned to poverty and bastardy—it would not be just, it would not be right. God will substitute for the absent mother, theft will substitute for property. A petty theft here, a slight ecstasy there, these are enough to maintain his inner balance. Quickly he returns to sweet, natural confusion. But while he is stealing in innocence, while he modestly covets the martyr's palm, he is unaware that he is forging his destiny.

# A DIZZYING WORD

*Our sentence is not severe. Whatever commandment the culprit has violated is simply written upon his skin by the harrow.*

—KAFKA,
In the Penal Settlement

The child was playing in the kitchen. Suddenly he became aware of his solitude and was seized with anxiety, as usual. So he "absented" himself. Once again, he plunged into a kind of ecstasy. There is now no one in the room. An abandoned consciousness is reflecting utensils. A drawer is opening; a little hand moves forward.

*Caught in the act.* Someone has entered and is watching him. Beneath this gaze the child comes to himself. He who was not yet anyone suddenly becomes Jean Genet. He feels that he is blinding, deafening; he is a beacon, an alarm that keeps ringing. *Who* is Jean Genet? In a moment the whole village will know. . . . The child alone is in ignorance. In a state of fear and shame he continues his signal of distress. Suddenly

> . . . a dizzying word
> From the depths of the world abolishes
> the beautiful order. . . .*

A voice declares publicly: "You're a thief." The child is ten years old.

That was how it happened, in that or some other way. In all probability, there were offenses and then punishment, solemn oaths and relapses. It does not matter. The important thing is that Genet lived and has not stopped reliving this period of his life as if it had lasted only an instant.

It is the moment of awakening. The sleepwalking child opens his eyes and realizes he is stealing. It is revealed to him that he *is* a thief and he pleads guilty, crushed by a fallacy which he is unable to refute; he stole, he is therefore a thief. Can anything be more

* Genet, *Poèmes*, p. 56.

evident? Genet, thunderstruck, considers his act, looks at it from every angle. No doubt about it, it is a theft. And theft is an offense, a crime. What he *wanted* was to steal; what he *did,* a theft; what he *was,* a thief. A timid voice is still protesting within him; he does not *recognize* his intentions. But soon the voice grows silent. The act is so luminous, so sharply defined, that there is no mistaking its nature. He tries to go back, to understand himself, but it is too late, he has lost his bearings. The dazzlingly evident present confers its meaning on the past; Genet now *recalls* that he cynically decided to steal. What happened? Actually, almost nothing: an action undertaken without reflection, conceived and carried out in the secret, silent inwardness in which he often takes refuge, has just *become objective.* Genet learns what he *is objectively.* It is this *transition* that is going to determine his entire life.

The metamorphosis occurs immediately. He is nothing more than what he was before, yet he is now unrecognizable. Driven from the lost paradise, exiled from childhood, from the immediate, condemned to see himself, suddenly provided with a monstrous and guilty "ego," isolated, separated, in short changed into a bug. An evil principle dwelt in him unperceived, and now it has been discovered. It is this principle which is the source of everything. It produces the slightest impulses of his soul. The child lived at peace with himself; his desires seemed to him limpid and simple. Their transparency now appears to have been deceptive. They had a double bottom. Little Genet's shame reveals eternity to him. He is a thief by birth, he will remain one until his death. Time is only a dream in which his evil nature is refracted into a thousand gleams, a thousand petty thefts, but does not belong to the temporal order. *Genet is a thief;* that is his truth, his eternal essence. And, if he *is* a thief, he must therefore always be one, everywhere, not only when he steals, but when he eats, when he sleeps, when he kisses his foster mother. Each of his gestures betrays him, reveals his vile nature in broad daylight. At any moment the teacher may interrupt the lesson, look Genet in the eyes and cry out: "There's a thief!" It would be vain for him to think he deserved leniency by admitting his errors, by mastering the perversity of his instincts. All the impulses of his heart are equally guilty because all alike express his essence.

If only the dizzying word had been uttered by his own father, the discovery would have taken place within the indestructible family unit, in other words within the unit of a single collective mind. The young culprit, isolated for a moment within that mind like an

alien thought, would have been resorbed into it immediately. One doesn't rob one's family. But though his foster parents' tenderness might at times have given Genet the illusion of his being their son, it is dissipated the moment they become his judges. Because he is regarded as a thief Genet *becomes* a foundling. Father and mother unknown. Nobody wants to take responsibility for his birth. He seems to have produced himself, in defiance of everyone, in a burst of evil will: Evil is self-caused. At the same time, his faults are explained by dark forces whose origin antedate his birth: "That little thief, where does he come from? He surely takes after someone. Only a slut would abandon her son. A chip off the old block." In short, everything hangs together, everything becomes clear. Born of nothingness, the child has nothing, is nothing. His being has the substantiality of nonbeing. If it exists, it does so like a corrosive acid. Besides, does it exist? Is it not simply the foul beast that rushes through the troubled dream of an honest man?

Jouhandeau, another pariah, has aptly expressed what might be called the ontological curse: "The insult is perpetual. It is not only in the mouth of this person or that, explicit, but on all the lips that name me. It is in 'being' itself, in my being, and I find it in all the eyes that look at me. It is in all the hearts that have dealings with me. It is in my blood and is inscribed on my face in letters of fire. It accompanies me everywhere and always, in this world and in the other. It is myself, and it is God in person who proffers it in proffering me, who eternally gives me that execrable name, who sees me from that standpoint of wrath."

There is not even the possibility of shifting the blame to God by saying "since it's you who made me, *you're* the guilty one," for in this magical concept nature and freedom are one and the same: although the thief is enchained since he is unable to change, he is free since he is condemned. This is reminiscent of Calvinistic predestination which leaves the evildoer full responsibility for Evil while taking from him the possibility of doing Good. Being is here a subtle and radical perversion of freedom, a constant inclination to do evil, a kind of wrong-way grace, a specific gravity of free will which makes it always fall to the very bottom. In this futile maneuver, freedom is responsible for Being and Being petrifies freedom. Although Genet is free to be guilty, he is not free to change. The reason is that the wrath of the just wants to perpetuate itself; if Genet became honest, it would lose its object. This virtuous anger is relentless. It is not enough for it to murder a child; it must also contrive a hopeless future for the monster it has just fabricated. He

is told that prison and the penal colony are in store for him. Everything is decided; from an eternal cause derive irremediable consequences in the temporal order: "You'll end on the gallows!" In a state of dazzlement Genet contemplates the ineluctable course of the universe and the interdependence of the circumstances that will lead him to capital punishment. Only yesterday everything was possible. He was perhaps the son of a prince; he would perhaps become a saint. He lived in an anarchy of desire, his heart was gladdened by chance graces, the future was still open. But now all is in order: he has been provided with a nature, a guilty freedom and a destiny. He is ten years old and he already knows to the last detail the life that he will have to sip drop by drop: "The order of this world—seen inside out—appears so perfect in its inevitability that this world has only to disappear."

Indeed, what is the point of living? Time is only a tedious illusion, everything is already there, his future is only an eternal present and, since his death is at the end of it—his death, his sole release—since he is *already dead,* in short, already guillotined, it's better to get it over with right away. To vanish, to slip between their fingers, to flow out of the present and down the drain, to be swallowed up by nothingness. Who of us has not, at least once in his life, been struck, seized, crippled with shame and has not wanted to die on the spot? In vain: Genet remains alive, solid, bulky, scandalous, before the indignant eyes of adults. But he will preserve in the depths of his heart that old, sad, aching dream of disappearing. In fact, he will go even further: like old Lapérouse in *The Counterfeiters* who, lacking the courage to kill himself, decides that he is dead, Genet will henceforth date subsequent events from the day of his suicide. And later, in the dismal ceremonies which will restore the original crisis, the primary rite will be that of death.

Two types of persecution maniacs are found in asylums. On the one hand are those who are victims of a conspiracy. The entire world is secretly engaged in trying to destroy them. The passer-by is a spy, a provocateur, a judge, people are trying to dishonor them, imprison them, perhaps kill them. At least they remain free and sovereign in their heart of hearts. They scorn their opponents and foil their schemes. They enjoy their solitude with mingled pride and anxiety. But there are others who can no longer take refuge even within themselves, for the enemy is already installed there. Their persecutors have placed spies and torturers in the innermost recesses of their consciousness, in the privacy of their inner life. Their thoughts are stolen from them, they are made to utter words

which they loathe, their enemies infuse them, by means of strange instruments, with evil certainties, terrible convictions, frightful desires, which they do not recognize. I cannot imagine any suffering worse than theirs. Outside are horror, monstrous beasts, the hatred of a whole people, sometimes even of the universe. If they withdraw into themselves, they find the situation even more ghastly: those whom they were fleeing are already there, laughing and waiting for them.

It is these wretched creatures that the child Genet has suddenly begun to resemble. The contempt and anger of decent people would be bearable if he could return blame for blame and hatred for hatred. And that is what he probably would have done if the "accident" had occurred a little later. Had he been called a thief at the age of seventeen, Genet would have laughed. That is the age at which one liquidates paternal values. He would have had a thousand ways and means at his disposal. He could have retorted that his accusers were themselves scoundrels, could have pointed to evil everywhere and have forced it, by means of its very excess, to be resorbed, along with good, into a kind of indifference and wretchedness, he could have challenged the principles of public morality in the name of a Nietzschean or anarchistic ethic, could have denied the existence of values and deigned to recognize only the law of force.* But it is a child who has been caught, a very young child, timid, respectful, right-thinking, one who has had a religious upbringing, in accordance with the best principles, who has been imbued with so passionate a love of God that he desires saintliness rather than wealth. Nor can he resort to self-defense by accusing adults, for adults are gods to this religious little soul. He is trapped like a rat: he has been so thoroughly inculcated with the morality in whose name he is condemned that it is part of his very fiber. No, whatever he does, the honest folk have the initiative and will not lose it. They have penetrated to the very bottom of his heart and installed there a permanent delegate which is himself. It is he himself who will be both the court and the accused, the policeman and the thief. It is he who will commit the offense and who will deliver sentence and apply it. If he tries to withdraw into himself in order to escape the censure of those about him, he will find an even more severe censure, his own. He will be a zealous self-tormentor and will henceforth experience his states of mind, moods, thoughts, even his perceptions, in the form of a conflict. The sim-

* Cf. Appendix II.

plest, most legitimate desire will appear to him as a thief's desire, hence as a guilty one. The adults triumph; they have found an accomplice who is none other than the accused. One isn't as lucky as that every day. In fact, the situation is even better: had the child developed normally, he would have gradually freed himself from this simple-minded morality, he would at least have made it more flexible, broader, would have perhaps replaced it by a religious ethic, by mysticism, by a liberal eclecticism or by anarchism, but he would have done so quietly, without turmoil, without inner catastrophe. But the terrible blow he has just received will forever prevent this amicable liquidation. Genet will not change. In his worst deviations he will remain faithful to the morality of his childhood. He will flout it, he will perhaps hate it, he will try to drag it with him through the mud, but "the original crisis" has burned it into him as with a red-hot iron. Whatever happens from now on, whatever he may do, whatever way out he may invent, one thing remains forbidden him: *self-acceptance.* The law of his consciousness is conflict. Until the "crisis," he lived in the "sweet confusion" of the immediate, he was unaware that he was a person. He has learned that he is and, by the same token, that this person is a monster.

"Guilt," he will write later, "gives rise, first, to individuality." Beneath the accusing finger, it is all one, for the little thief, to discover that he is himself and that he is other than all. And no doubt many people have testified to the fact that, around the age of ten, they discovered their individuality with amazement or anguish. The child Gide wept in his mother's arms and screamed that he "was not like other children." But this discovery is usually made without much damage. Adults have nothing to do with it. The child is playing alone, a slight change in the landscape, an event, a fleeting thought, is enough to give rise to the reflective awareness which reveals our Ego to us. And, as I have shown elsewhere, this ego is not yet anything to itself, except the empty and universal form of individuality. To be unlike the others is to be like everyone, since each is other than all and the same as itself. If the reflective operation takes place normally, it not only does not prevent reciprocal relationships, it produces them. I feel that I am other than Peter and I know that Peter resembles me because he feels he is other than I. However, the otherness that Genet discovers in himself excludes any reciprocity. It is not a case of an empty and universal form but of an individual difference that has to do with both form and content. There is Genet and there are all the others. And it is the height of irony that the child's dreadful loneliness

occasions a finer understanding among those who condemn him: when honest people baptize an evildoer, they are in raptures; they huddle together, the better to block his way; they would even be willing to love each other. Genet quite realizes that he is an oblate and that his sacrifice serves as a bond among his sacrificers. *All the others,* whatever the differences separating them, recognize that they are fellow creatures in that they are not, thank God, thieves. *All the others,* whatever their conflicting interests, recognize their kinship because each reads in his neighbors' eyes the horror that Genet inspires in them; they constitute a single monstrous consciousness that judges and curses. It is horrible to "achieve" unanimity, to see suddenly that it is possible, that it is present, that one is touching it, that one has built it, and to know at the same time that one has done so against oneself. It would be pointless for him to round on the others and exclude them in turn, for there is not a square yard on earth from which he can chase them; he possesses nothing of his own. Thus, the loathing he inspires is a one-way affair; he fills honest folk with loathing but cannot loathe them. The only feeling he retains in his heart is love, a humiliated, forbidden love which shamefully, humbly, seeks opportunities to manifest itself. Our Lady of the Flowers, in the criminal court, looks for the first time at the presiding magistrate who is going to condemn him to death: "It is so sweet to love that he could not keep from dissolving into a feeling of sweet, trusting tenderness for the judge. 'Maybe he ain't a louse!' he thought."

The child loves his judges, he tries to draw near them, to melt, even to the point of losing consciousness, into the unanimity which he has created. He finds no other way than to share the disgust he inspires in them, than to despise himself with their contempt. The trap works well. Genet tears himself apart with his own hands. He has now become an absolute object of loathing.

Once upon a time, in Bohemia, there was a flourishing industry which seems to have fallen off. One would take children, slit their lips, compress their skulls and keep them in a box day and night to prevent them from growing. As a result of this and similar treatment, the children were turned into amusing monsters who brought in handsome profits. A more subtle process was used in the making of Genet, but the result is the same: they took a child and made a monster of him for reasons of social utility. If we want to find the real culprits in this affair, let us turn to the decent folk and ask them by what strange cruelty they made of a child their scapegoat.*

* Cf. Appendix I.

Action, whatever it be, modifies that which is in the name of that which is not yet. Since it cannot be carried out without breaking up the old order, it is a permanent revolution. It demolishes in order to build and disassembles in order to reassemble. From morning to night we heap up shavings, ashes, scraps. All construction entails an at least equal amount of destruction. Our unstable societies fear lest a false movement cause them to lose their balance. They therefore ignore the negative moment of our activities. We must love without hating the enemy of what we love, must affirm without denying the contrary of what we affirm, must elect without spurning those we have not elected, must produce without consuming. We rapidly cart away the dead, we stealthily recover waste, every day we mask, in the name of cleaning up, the destruction of the day before. We conceal the pillaging of the planet. The fear of knocking down the edifice is so great that we even take from ourselves our power of creating: we say that man does not invent, that he discovers. We reduce the new to the old. Upkeep, maintenance, preservation, restoration, renewal—these are the actions that are permitted. They all fall under the heading of repetition. Everything is full, everything hangs together, everything is in order, everything has always existed, the world is a museum of which we are the curators. Nevertheless, spirit, as Hegel says, is anxiety. But this anxiety horrifies us. We must eliminate it and arrest spirit by ejecting its springwork of negativity. Unable to get rid of this malignant postulation completely, the right-thinking man castrates himself; he cuts the negative moment away from his freedom and casts out the bloody mess. Freedom is thus cut in two; each of its halves wilts away separately. One of them remains within us. It identifies forever Good with Being, hence with what already is. As Being is the measure of perfection, an existing regime is always more perfect than one which does not exist. It is said to have demonstrated its worth. Anyone wishing to introduce the slightest improvement (and it is quite assumed that improvement is a pious notion which implies no destruction; it is a transition to a higher perfection which envelops and includes the prior perfection) is likewise required to demonstrate its worth and to give evidence, in all other respects, of an all the more profound attachment to Being, that is, to customs and traditions. To the right-thinking man, to be alone and to be wrong are one and the same; to isolate oneself is to withdraw deliberately into one's finiteness, therefore to will one's own nothingness. His dream is that history may end and that there may come at last the time of happy repetition within the great sleep.

No doubt he may fall short, but if he does it is as a result of omission, ignorance, weakness, in short, because of the patch of nothingness which remains in him and to which he submits, though detesting it. He will compensate for this particularity by strict obedience to the imperatives of the group. Moreover, to fall short is *nothing*, literally: our shortcomings are lacks of being and they are efficacious only through the Being which sustains them. The worst is not always certain.

The other half of his freedom, though cut away from him and cast far off, does not, however, leave him undisturbed. Poor right-thinking man: he wanted, in the beginning, to concern himself only with the positive and with Being, to obey unerringly, to realize on his own little plot of ground a small, local end of history. But the fact is that history does not stop; Being is paralyzed, surrounded by Nonbeing; and, in addition, man, man himself, be he respectful or scoffing, insolent or servile, cannot affirm without denying. If he poses a limit, he does so necessarily in order to transgress it, for he cannot pose it without at the same time posing the unlimited. Does he mean to respect a social prohibition? By the same impulse his freedom suggests that he violate it, for to give oneself laws and to create the possibility of disobeying them come to the same thing. The right-thinking man shuts himself up in a voluntary prison and locks the doors, but his stubborn freedom makes him leave by the window. "By the law," says St. Paul, "is the knowledge of sin." The decent man will make himself deaf, dumb and paralyzed. It is he who has eyes that see not and ears that hear not. He is, by virtue of himself, the most abstract negation: the negation of negation. He will define himself narrowly by traditions, by obedience, by the automatism of Good, and will give the name *temptation* to the live, vague swarming which is still himself, but a himself which is wild, free, outside the limits he has marked out for himself. His own negativity falls outside him, since he denies it with all his might. Substantified, separated from any positive intention, it becomes a pure negation that poses itself for its own sake, a pure rage to destroy that goes round in circles, namely Evil. Evil is the unity of all his impulses to criticize, to judge, to reject insofar as he refuses to *recognize* them and regard them as the normal exercise of his freedom and insofar as he relates them to an external cause. It is his dangerous inclination to develop his ideas to their ultimate limits when decency or discipline bids him stop midway. It is his anxiety, his fundamental disbelief or his individuality that comes to him from without, like Another himself, to tempt him. It is what he

wants but does not want to want. It is the object of a constant and constantly rejected will which he regards as other than his "true" will. In short, it is the maxim, both in him and outside of him, of the Other's will. Not the will of some particular Other, nor even of all Others, but of that which in each individual is other than himself, other than self, other than all. Evil is the Other. And it is himself insofar as he is for himself Other than Self. It is the will to be other and that all be Other. It is that which is always Other than that which is.

This strange object is a pure contradiction, which will not be surprising if we simply recall its origin: being the destruction of all, it destroys *itself;* it is, at every moment, its own contrary. If one had to examine its ins and outs, one would get lost in the maze of aporias and antinomies. It both is and is not: as pure negation, it reduces itself to pure nonbeing; but since it subsists before our eyes as a temptation, since it has enough reality to inspire hatred, it must also *be,* to a certain extent. One may reply, like Christians, that it borrows its being from being. But in order to "borrow," it must also be. And, from a certain point of view, one must recognize that Being is first: since Evil is defined as Other than Being, it does seem that Being arises, at least logically, before its "Other." And since evil power is in essence a will to destruction, it must have a being to corrode, and it cannot at all manifest itself unless this being is given. But as, on the other hand, we have forged its concept by dividing that which was not divisible and by separating with a single stroke the two indivisible moments of human freedom, we are forced to recognize that Good and Evil are rigorously contemporary, that is, in religious language, that they are two equally immortal principles: the respectable man is Manichaean. By Evil one therefore means both the Being of Nonbeing and the Nonbeing of Being. The same reasons will give rise to the second antinomy, for Evil, being first *the other than Being,* is relative in its essence, but as it is other *absolutely* and not in this or that particular respect, it must be an absolute in its own way. Absolute and relative at the same time, it is both an abstract principle and a particular will. Insofar as all kinds of attrition and ruin are ascribed to it, including those which are the effects of natural agents, it is a pneumatic principle that circulates through the world. There is an evil which is peculiar to consciousness as there is to everything, a leprosy that eats away at it and that is called hebetude, imbecility, darkness. But, in another sense, just as there is Good only in a will that wills itself unconditionally good, so there is Evil only in an intention

that wills itself expressly evil. Evil is then consciousness itself at the height of its lucidity, for an evil mind is all the more perverse in that it is more aware of its damnation and wills it more. It pursues both its triumph and its ruin; firstly, because it will be engulfed in its victory along with Good, secondly, because its passion for destruction must know no limits and because it must end by turning this passion against itself. It was for the purpose of planting despair in the very heart of the joy of hurting that "fiendish laughter" and "evil pleasure" were invented. The Evil of consciousness, which is opacity, and consciousness in evil, which is transparency, must meet at the limit. The fact is that in this free and radical undertaking of demolition which claims responsibility for all the consequences of its acts, including its own ruin, one takes pleasure in recognizing at the same time an absolute servitude. Right-thinking people have developed the myth of Evil by depriving human freedom of its positive power and reducing it to its negativity alone. Hence, the evil man, who is negative in essence, is a man possessed whose destiny, whatever he may say, will always be to harm. He is free to do evil; for him the worst is always certain. Indeed, it is not sufficient that his conduct have harmful consequences for others or that it seem blameworthy in the eyes of others. If Evil wants to become absolute, it must be an object of loathing to the one who commits it. If the evil man could be in harmony with himself, this harmony would have the appearance of Good, and if his behavior seemed tolerable to him, he would sin out of ignorance or precipitancy, but not out of malignancy. He must plunge into the worst and at the same time be dragged into it by a kind of inverted grace; he must plunge and resist simultaneously; he must want both to stop and to be pushed even further; he must adhere unreservedly to his aim to harm and must thrust it aside as the effect of an abominable inclination. The evil man approves and loathes himself; he loathes himself for approving himself, he approves himself for loathing himself. His entire consciousness is darkness at the core of his translucidity. This secret hebetude of consciousness is otherness: self and other than self in the absolute identity of self. Evil, which is Being and Nonbeing, Absolute and Relative, Principle and Person, Self-Respect and Self-Hatred, is, in the last analysis, both Order and Disorder. It is Disorder on principle since all its efforts are aimed at destroying order; as Claudel says: "It does not compromise." And yet, if it is to be effective, it must at least have power to destroy, that is, it must have a kind of order, a technique, traditions. It is thus a disorder of all orders, an order of

all disorders. It is a corrosive acid, a torment, an explosive, it is radical dispersion. It changes the most indissoluble unity into multiplicity. But since it strews Discord everywhere, since it is the greatest common factor, it must be the secret and imperceptible unity of all multiplicity.

If that is what Evil is, a geometric locus of all contradictions, it stands to reason that no one would dream of indulging in it unreservedly: "No man does evil voluntarily." Of course. What would he gain by it? Evil is gratuitous. It is a luxury activity that requires leisure and yields no profit. We are told that "crime doesn't pay," and that is so. Evil, like Good, requires that it be its own reward. If you steal, or even kill, in order to live, living is a good, you have reduced plunder and murder to the role of means. Evil is fatiguing, it requires an unmaintainable vigilance. Schiller, who was haunted by Kantian ethics, used to ask himself uneasily regarding each of his acts: "Have I probed my mind? Has a self-seeking motive escaped me?" Similarly, the evildoer should ask himself anxiously: "Have I really done Evil for Evil's sake? Have I not acted out of self-interest?" Furthermore, the evil action, even if performed for its own sake, should contain within itself—and should resolve—so many contradictions that it would require invention, inspiration, in a word, genius. It would thus be akin, as Genet often states, to a work of art. Better still, to poetry. The folk mind is clearly aware that evil is beyond its means. It has invented the myth of the man who sold his soul to the Devil. This future victim has not enough strength of soul to do evil *for Evil's sake.* He seeks his own advantage, his pleasure, he wants gold, women, power. And it is Satan who, through him, engages in destroying souls out of pure and gratuitous malignity. At the end of a lecture in which I had attempted to expound the views of some contemporary moralists in all their complexity, a bright-eyed minister came up to me and said: "It's so much easier to do one's duty." I must add that he corrected himself almost immediately. "And harder, too," he added. But I had understood his first reaction. Yes, Good, as they understand it, is easier than Evil. It is easy and reassuring "to do one's duty." It is a matter of training, since everything is repetition. Who would deliberately withdraw from the flock and its comfortable precepts to take up with that mutilated freedom whose bleeding stumps are writhing in the dust?

The conclusion that seems to follow is that the evildoer does not exist. It is only the Good man who is constantly preoccupied with Evil, since Evil is first his own freedom, that is, an enemy who is

constantly springing up and whom he must constantly down. But let us not jump to conclusions. The evildoer does exist; we encounter him everywhere, at all times. He exists because the Good man invented him.

When King Louis XVI was brought back from Varennes, the bourgeois deputies realized with terror that all they had to do to become republicans was to carry their principles a bit further. Everything—their interests, their conservatism, their contempt for the masses—contributed to inspiring them with horror of a republic, and yet the idea was present, silent, passive, vertiginous. Their own freedom presented it to them as the logical consequence of their earlier act. Were they going to loathe themselves? Fortunately other citizens called for a republic. The Club des Cordeliers circulated a petition demanding that the King be deposed. What a relief! The possibility which they feared now became quite foreign to them. It was still supported by a freedom, but this time it was a totally *other* freedom. It was as if this importunate part of their free will had actually withdrawn from them and gone off to lead an independent existence elsewhere. Supported by others, the idea of a republic ceased to be a temptation and became an object of horror. The petitioners were *evildoers,* and they were told as much. And whom does one strike in the person of the "dirty, greedy, sensual, negating" Jew? One's self, one's own greed, one's own lechery. Whom does one lynch in the American South for raping a white woman? A Negro? No. Again one's self. Evil is a projection. I would go as far as to say that it is both the basis and aim of all projective activity.* As for the evildoer, we all have our own: he is a man whose situation makes it possible for him to present to us in broad daylight and in objective form the obscure temptations of our freedom. If you want to know a decent man, look for the vices he hates most in others. You will have the lines of force of his fears and terrors, you will breathe the odor that befouls his beauteous soul. In the case of those who condemn Genet most severely, I would say that homosexuality is their constant and

* Everything that can be said about projection has been said. I wish merely to relate an anecdote. A very good friend of mine had lived abroad for a long time, and his speech had become studded with Anglicisms. When he returned to France after the Liberation, we were delighted to see each other again, but shortly thereafter disagreements of a personal and political nature arose between us. We met frequently, but our relations were strained. One day, the discussion grew heated. He objected, courteously but with a good deal of annoyance, to my opinions (which had been his own before the war) and my conduct. As he grew more excited, his French became less correct and on three occasions the same Anglicism crept into his speech. The third time, he looked at me irritably and asked brusquely: "Why do you keep making that exasperating mistake?"

constantly rejected temptation, the object of their innermost hatred, and that they are glad to hate it in another person because they thus have an opportunity to look away from themselves. And I do not mean, to be sure, that this constantly rejected homosexuality seems to them an inclination of their nature. Quite the contrary, it is diffuse, it is a shifty something about persons and things, it is a certain disturbing appearance of the world that might very well open up suddenly and become dizzying, it is an inner uneasiness, it is the dim and constant consciousness that there is no recourse within themselves against themselves. Genet is useful to them; they can hate in him the half of themselves which they reject.

Thus, the evildoer is the Other. Evil—fleeting, artful, marginal Evil—can be seen only out of the corner of one's eye and in others. Never is it more perceptible than in wartime. We know the enemy only by comparison with ourselves; we imagine his intentions according to ours; we set traps for him into which we know we would fall if we were in his place and we avoid those which we would have set. The enemy is our twin brother, our image in the mirror. Yet the same conduct which we consider good when it is ours seems to us detestable when it is his. He is the evildoer par excellence. It is therefore during a war that a Good man has the clearest conscience. It is in time of war that there are the fewest lunatics. Unfortunately, one cannot always be fighting. From time to time there must be peace. For peacetime, society has, in its wisdom, created what might be called professional evildoers. These evil men are as necessary to good men as whores are to decent women. They are fixation abscesses. For a single sadist there is any number of appeased, clarified, relaxed consciousnesses. They are therefore very carefully recruited. They must be bad by birth and without hope of change. That is why one chooses men with whom the decent members of the community have no reciprocal relationship: so that these bad people cannot take it into their heads to pay us back in kind and start thinking of us what we think of them. And as Evil is negation, separation, disintegration, its natural representatives will be sought among the separated and separatists, among the unassimilable, the undesirable, the repressed, the rejected. The candidates include the oppressed and exploited in every category, the foreign workers, the national and ethnic minorities. But these are still not the best recruits. These people sometimes organize among themselves, educate themselves and become conscious of their race or class. They then discover, through hatred, the meaning of reciprocity, and the oppressor comes to personify Evil for them

just as they personify Evil for the oppressor. Fortunately there exist in our society products of disassimilation, castoffs: abandoned children, "the poor," bourgeois who have lost their status, "lumpen-proletariat," déclassés of all kinds, in short, all the wretched. With these we are tranquil. They cannot unite with any group since nobody wants them. And as solitude is their lot, we do not have to worry about their associating among themselves. That is why, in general, we give them preference.

Genet fulfills all the required conditions. This abandoned child is an authentic castoff. He seems overwhelmed by a fabulous bad luck that guarantees us against any accidental return of reciprocity. Placed under observation for a time, he gave evidence of evil instincts and committed punishable offenses. This is all that was needed. By the gaze that surprised him, by the finger that pointed at him, by the voice that called him a thief, the collectivity doomed him to Evil. They were waiting for him. There was going to be a vacancy: some old convict lay dying on Devil's Island; there has to be new blood among the wicked too. Thus, all the rungs of the ladder which he has to descend have been prepared in advance. Even before he emerged from his mother's womb, they had already reserved beds for him in all the prisons of Europe and places for him in all shipments of criminals. He had only to go to the trouble of being born; the gentle, inexorable hands of the Law will conduct him from the National Foundling Society to the penal colony.

If we want to know ourselves, we have two sources of information: our inner sense furnishes us with certain facts ("I'm happy, unhappy, I'm attracted, repelled, by such-and-such a person. I have an urge to travel," etc.), and the people about us furnish us with others. These data sometimes overlap and complement each other. We can correct one body of data by means of the other. For example, I can observe that I am angry when my brother points out to me that I am losing my self-control. My family can even draw my attention to an irritation that I am trying to hide from myself: "You're white as a sheet, your hands are trembling," etc. And, vice versa, by revealing this anger to them I can enable them to interpret certain aspects of my behavior which would otherwise remain mysterious to them: "So that's why you didn't say good morning to so-and-so," etc. To hesitate as to which of two roads to take is often to turn one's head to the right, then to the left, to take a few steps in one direction, then a few in the other. If I hesitate, there is probably nothing more in me than the consciousness of these bodily movements. But, inversely, the witness who observes me and

*sees* me hesitating perceives nothing more than these same movements. Hence, the external perception of the witness and my inner sense agree on this point, and in this case there is no privileged observer.

But in the majority of cases, and particularly if it is a matter of feelings, qualities, traits of character, or complex behavior, we are unable to bring our inner data into line with the information given by our external informants because the two are not of the same nature. I am not an object to myself—at least not *at first*—and if I become one, this object is of a very particular nature. It remains the "incomparable monster" of which Malraux speaks, whereas to others I am first an object. Thus, the *objective qualities* which they recognize in me express not so much what I am in myself as what I am with *respect to them.* The quality that is being considered therefore represents a complex body of two terms: I and my witness, and the relationship between these two terms. In addition, most of the time it has a *practical* truth, that is, it is an item of information concerning, in particular, the behavior to adopt toward me. I therefore cannot internalize this information and dissolve it in my subjectivity. It is not *soluble* in my consciousness. If I am told that I am intelligent and witty or dull-witted and coarse, this information refers to the effect I produce on others. To be witty, for example, is to entertain a well-defined social set in conformity with certain rules. I cannot therefore have the intuition that I *am* witty; this intuition is necessarily given *to another,* and it is revealed by the pleasure he takes in listening to me. Similarly, I can know that I am *thinking* but not that I am *intelligent.* The idea of *intelligence* presupposes not only a certain intellectual ease or swiftness *observed from without,* but, in addition, certain subjective dispositions in the witness who recognizes this quality in me, for example, admiration and a readiness to have more confidence in me than in himself when it comes to solving certain difficulties: "See whether you understand this, you who are intelligent." Hence, when all goes well we can distinguish our being-for-self from our being-for-the-other. We know that our consciousness is infallible in a certain very limited area and that its intuitions are obviously true. We also know that information which another furnishes us is only probable (A. considers me intelligent, but B. finds me stupid. Who will decide between them? And is it possible, in this domain, to decide by majority vote?) and that it does not concern our inner depths but rather our external relations with others. It is therefore quite true that these qualities which are recognized in

us elude our consciousness, not because they are hidden in an unconscious which is situated behind it, but because they are in front of us, in the world, and are originally a relationship to the other. "Wittiness" is, of course, a certain gift that I have—if I have it—without realizing it. But it is evident that this is no more a structure of my unconscious than an immediate datum of my consciousness. It is a feature which characterizes me not insofar as I am I to myself, but insofar as I am Another to Others.

But this information is sometimes communicated to us in such a way that we ascribe more reality to what others teach us than to what we could learn by ourself. Out of submission or respect, we take information which, in any event, is only probable as being an unconditional certainty. On the other hand, we are tempted to regard the information of our consciousness as dubious and obscure. This means that we have given primacy to the object which we are to Others over the subject we are to ourself. A young woman, for example, is having marital difficulties. She is not accepted unreservedly by her in-laws; she feels that her husband is slipping away from her. Tact, patience and a great deal of experience are required in order to keep him, in order to overcome the family's bias. Since she lacks these qualities, she feels that she is drowning. She flounders about. The difficulties are too great. She lives in a state of anxiety. And, as is to be expected, she reacts with anger, for anger is merely a blind and magical attempt to simplify situations that are too complex. Her consciousness will teach her all this if she observes herself with sufficient perseverance. She will become aware that she is trying to discard all rules by plunging into violence. She will therefore realize that anger is not a hereditary curse or a destiny but simply an inept reaction to a too complicated problem. If the problem changes, the mood will also change. Her husband, however, tells her that she is *irascible.* In a sense, this is true. It is a correct indication of the behavior to be adopted toward her *by others.* This *practical* notion indicates simply that she has disconcerting and unpredictable outbursts of temper and that consequently she must be treated with a certain consideration.

But if, out of remorse, out of masochism, out of a deep feeling of inferiority, this young woman adopts the social and objective datum as if it were the absolute truth about her, if she accuses herself of having an *irascible nature,* if she projects behind her, into the darkness of the unconscious, a permanent predisposition to anger of which each particular outburst is an emanation, then she subordinates her reality as a conscious subject to the Other that she is

for Others, and she grants to the Other a superiority to herself and confers upon what is probable a superiority to what is certain. She endows that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society. In short, I would say that she alienates herself from the object which she is to others.

This type of alienation is widespread. Most of the time, however, it is a matter of partial or temporary alienation. But when children are subjected, from their earliest days, to great social pressure, when their Being-for-Others is the subject of a collective image accompanied by value judgments and social prohibitions, the alienation is sometimes total and definitive. This is the case of most pariahs in caste societies. They internalize the objective and external judgments which the collectivity passes on them, and they view themselves in their subjective individuality on the basis of an "ethnic character," a "nature," an "essence" which merely express the contempt in which *others* hold them. The Indian untouchable thinks that he *is actually* untouchable. He internalizes the prohibition of which he is the object, and makes of it an inner principle which justifies and explains the conduct of the other Hindus toward him.

The situation is exactly the same for the small caste of untouchables whom our societies have charged with personifying Evil and whom they overwhelm with prohibitions under the name of criminals. Yes, they are criminals. This means, in all good logic, that they *have committed* one or more crimes and that they are liable to punishments set down in the statute book. But by virtue of the ambiguity of the term, society convinces them—and they let themselves be convinced—that this objective definition actually applies to their hidden, subjective being. The criminal that they were to others is now ensconced deep within them, like a monster. They thus allow themselves to be governed by *another,* that is, by a being who has reality only in the eyes of others. Their failings and errors are transformed into a permanent predisposition, that is, into a destiny.

Such is the case of the child Genet. Society has charged him with personifying the Evildoer, that is, the Other. Now, as we have seen, Evil is a concept for external use only. Nobody will say voluntarily, before being recognized as guilty, "I want Evil." Evil, which springs from the right-thinking man's fear of his freedom, is originally a projection and a catharsis. It is therefore *always* an object. Moreover, as we have seen, if we attempted to establish it within ourself, the contradictory terms composing it would repel each other vio-

lently and would each collapse separately. But this matters little to us, since the fact is that we perceive it in Others. Yes, *for us* Evil is impossible. Therefore, we do not seek to actualize it. But since this Other desires Evil, it is for him to take over its contradictions. Let him manage as best he can. The proof, moreover, that one can make everything hang together, with the aid of an efficacious grace that probably comes from Hell, is precisely the fact *that there are* evildoers. There are evildoers, therefore Evil is possible. Such is our proof *a posteriori.*

But what happens, then, to the poor wretch on whom the decent man has projected all his evil desires, his sadism, his homicidal impulses and his lustful dreams? How does he manage to make a whole of all these contradictory postulations? Ah, that's *his* affair. The decent man doesn't give a damn.

The respectful consciousness of little Genet has begun its work. To all the others Evil is outside, in others. To him alone, poor hoodwinked child, Evil is *in him.*

*For the others,* his function is to take their forbidden desires upon himself and to reflect them like a mirror; *for himself,* he must incorporate these desires into himself, must internalize them, must make them *his* desires. Not that he is asked to *desire* the impure or to *will* Evil by deliberate intentions of his consciousness. He is required only to recognize this evil will as inspiring his daily desires, his ordinary wishes. The child tries to do this as best he can. His candor, his confidence, his respect make him the best auxiliary of adults. He has been told that he is bad, he therefore believes it. He conscientiously seeks the evil desires and evil thoughts of decent people at the very source of his subjectivity. He is a diligent evildoer.

But, as it happens, Evil is the Other. The Other than Being, the Other than Good, the Other than self. Here we have the key to Genet. This is what must be understood first: Genet is a child who has been convinced that he is, in his very depths, *Another than Self.* His life will henceforth be only the history of his attempts to perceive this Other in himself and to look it in the face—that is, to have an immediate and subjective intuition of his wickedness, to *feel* he is wicked—or to flee it. But this phantom—precisely because it is nothing—will not let itself be grasped. When the child turns to it, it disappears. When Genet tries to run away from it, suddenly it is there, like Carmen's rebellious bird.

The most immediate result is that the child is "doctored." He regards the existence of adults as more certain than his own and

their testimonies as truer than that of his consciousness. He affirms the priority of the object which he is to them over the subject which he is to himself. Therefore, without being clearly aware of it, he judges that the appearance (which he is to others) is the reality and that the reality (which he is to himself) is only appearance. He sacrifices his inner certainty to the principle of authority. He refuses to hear the voice of the *cogito.* He decides against himself in the very depths of his consciousness. He wants to regard the evident facts which his inner sense reveals to him about his own mental state as being mere lies, as approximations at best. On the other hand, he considers the merely probable hypotheses that the others set up about his conduct to be certainties. He makes every effort to believe that he must be informed of his particular essence by others and that he cannot attain it alone because it evades him on principle. The most inward part of himself is that which is most obscure to his eyes and most manifest to the eyes of others. He is a wrong-way Descartes who applies his methodical doubt to the content of the "I think," and it is hearsay knowledge that will provide him with his certainties. Out of a reverse idealism it is to himself that he applies the famous *esse est percipi,* and he recognizes himself as being only insofar as he is perceived. Our certainty of ourself finds its truth in the Other when the latter recognizes us. To Genet, the truth, separated from certainty, will be the intimidating, ceremonial, official thought of adults, judges, cops, decent people. He receives it without being allowed to practice it; it is communicated to him like a sentence. Nevertheless, his lonely, challenged, disregarded certainty of self grows within him like a weed in an abandoned garden.

No doubt, one does not impose silence on the *cogito;* consciousness will lose none of its transparency; it will not cease to reveal to him things that are indubitably evident. But he will zealously blindfold the eyes of his soul, will cast doubt on what is self-evident, will doubt the indubitable. Shuttling back and forth between two contradictory systems of reference, he regards as true what he does not succeed in believing, and as doubtful what he knows for a certainty. The most manifest intentions thereby become the most obscure; his passing states of consciousness are pure, iridescent reflections, without consistency. As for his own existence, since he attains it only through the mediation of others and merges it with the substantial being of "the Evildoer" or "the Thief," he is no more assured of it than of the existence of Greenland or of the Iron Mask. In short, he learns to think the unthinkable, to maintain the

unmaintainable, to pose as true what he very well knows to be false. We shall see later that he will build a whole system of sophistry on this procedure and that he will one day be able to turn it against the flabbergasted right-thinking man.

In his very depths, Genet is first an object—and an object to others. It is too early to speak of his homosexuality, but we can at least indicate its origin. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that feminine sexuality derives its chief characteristics from the fact that woman is an object to the other and to herself before being a subject. One can expect that Genet, who is the object par excellence, *will make himself an object* in sexual relations and that his eroticism will bear a resemblance to feminine eroticism.

It is possible to retrace with a certain accuracy the stages whereby Genet slowly transforms himself into a stranger to himself. And we shall see that it is simply a matter of progressively internalizing the sentence imposed by adults.

First of all, he wants to escape his destiny. He must awake from a nightmare. Caught, exposed, punished, he swears he will never do it again. Of course, in all sincerity. He does not recognize this act which has become objective and has suddenly revealed itself to be so terribly Other—simply because it is seen by the others; he hates it; he wishes it had never taken place. In hastily manifesting his will never to steal again, he tries to destroy symbolically his hardened, congealed act which encloses him in its carapace. Only a while ago he wanted to flee into the past, into the eternal, he wanted to die. Now he reverses the direction of his flight; his oath testifies to a wild impatience to escape into the future. Three or four years will go by during which he will not commit another theft; he has sworn not to. Already the years have gone by, he *is already* in the future, he turns upon this wretched present and confers upon it its true significance: it was only an accident. But at the same moment the Others' gaze again supervenes and cuts him off from himself. The others have not the same reasons as he to believe in his oath, because, in the first place, their indignation also mortgages the future. If—which is unlikely—it were demonstrated that the child would not steal again, their sense of outrage would have to simmer down. In order to perpetuate itself—for, like all passions, it tends to persevere in its being—it must change into a prophetic transport. It therefore postulates the eternity of its object. What it is already aiming at through the child thief is the adult, the hardened criminal, the habitual offender. Thus, in addition, this sacred emotion goes hand in hand with a legitimate mistrust. From a *practical*

point of view, the owners must take precautions; they would be guilty in their own eyes if they did not lock the closets. But these precautions foretoken a future that challenges Genet's oath. They are directed to a future that is both foreseeable and unforeseeable. Foreseeable: Genet has erred, *therefore* he will err. Unforeseeable: no one knows the hour or day of the next offense. Since the adults are unable to know the date of it, their vigilance confers upon the future theft a perpetual presence. It is in the air, in the silence of the grownups, in the severity of their faces, in the glance they exchange, in the locking of the drawer. Genet would like to forget about it, he buries himself in his work, but his foster mother, who tiptoed off, suddenly comes back and takes him by surprise: "What are you doing?" This is all that is needed: the forgotten theft comes to life again; it is present, vertiginous. Distrust and prophetic anger systematically project the past into the future; Genet's future fills with misdemeanors which are repeated at irregular intervals and which are the effect of a constant predisposition to steal. Obviously this predisposition is simply the reverse of the adults' expectation. It is their vigilance, but turned around and projected into Genet, who in turn reflects it back to them. If they must be constantly on guard against his thefts, it is because he is constantly ready to commit them, and the greater their fear of being robbed, the greater seems to them his inclination to theft. Naturally, after that, how could he be expected not to succumb? It is the adults themselves who want him to relapse. He will fall into error again, as often as they want him to.

So he now adopts the point of view of honest people. He docilely establishes within himself the inclination attributed to him. But this inclination is, in its very form, *the Other's*. It is never within our own self that we discover the unforeseeable foreseeability of which I have spoken; we discover it in those who we are not. In our own eyes, we are neither foreseeable nor unforeseeable. I do not *foresee* that I shall take the train this evening—I decide to take it, and if there remains a wide margin of possibility in my plans, the reason is that they depend on others as much as on me.* To be sure, I can at any moment change my plans, and I do not think of my versatility without a certain anxiety, but this anxiety comes from my feeling free and from the fact that nothing, not even my

* I can amuse myself by *foreseeing* what I shall be doing in ten years, but actually this future seems so remote that it appears to be that of another. And it is also true that the gambler who swears he will never again touch a card has only a limited confidence in his oath, not because he considers himself unforeseeable (or too foreseeable) but because he has a real and present knowledge of the inefficacy of oaths in the presence of his freedom.

own oaths, can tie me down. It is not a *fear* of a monster that may inhabit me and have reduced me to slavery, but rather the very opposite of such a fear.

Genet the thief will await himself as the others await him, with *their* expectations. Foreseeable to others, he will attempt to foresee himself. He will be afraid of his future thefts. Unforeseeable to honest people, he will become unforeseeable to himself; he will wonder every morning whether the new day will be marked by a theft. He will take precautions against himself as if he were another, another whom he has been told to keep an eye on. He will be careful not to leave *himself* alone. He will voluntarily leave an empty room to join his parents in the next one. He will keep an eye on himself; he will watch for the crisis, ready to call the others to the rescue against himself. He fears himself as one fears a fire, a flood, an avalanche. His thefts become external events which he is powerless to oppose and for which he is nevertheless responsible. He observes himself, spies on himself, foils himself, as if he were an odd instrument that one must learn to use. He struggles against an angel within him, an angel of Evil. In this dubious combat everything is inverted. Being oneself becomes being-other-than-self. It is no longer even possible to believe in one's own oaths; one distrusts them as one distrusts those of another. A foreign future challenges and mocks the future one has given oneself. And this future is a Destiny, a Fatality, because it is the reverse of *another freedom.* A freedom which is mine and which I do not know has prepared it for me, like a trap. In the depths of his consciousness Genet, like the animal in Kafka in the depths of its burrow, hears dull blows, scratchings. Another animal, a monster, is digging tunnels, is going to get at him and devour him. This other animal is himself. Yet he has *never seen it.*

For he has never seen it. A thief cannot have an intuition of himself *as thief.* The notion of "thief" is on principle incommensurate with the realities of the inner sense. It is of social origin and presupposes a prior definition of society, of the property system, a legal code, a judiciary apparatus and an ethical system of relationships among people. There can therefore be no question of a mind's *encountering* theft within itself, and with immediacy. On the other hand, the *Others,* all the Others, have this intuition at will; a thief is a palpable reality, like a tree, like a Gothic church. Here is a man being dragged along by two cops: "What has he done?" I ask. "He's a crook," answer the cops. The word strikes against its object like a crystal falling into a supersaturated solution. The solution imme-

diately crystallizes, enclosing the word inside itself. In prose, the word dies so that the object may be born. "He's a crook!" I forget the word then and there, I see, I touch, I breathe a crook; with all my senses I feel that secret substance: crime. I did not, of course, witness the theft, but that doesn't matter! The guilty man's torn, dusty clothes (he fell while trying to run away, he was beaten) contrast with the decent dress of the onlookers, with my own. They make me see that this man is beyond the pale. He is an untouchable *since* I cannot touch him without soiling my hands. The mud that stains his shirt and jacket is the mud of his soul *become visible.* He engages in a strange dance composed of false steps; he moves backward, forward, changes position by fits and starts; each of his movements is constrained. Quite simply because he is being taken to the police station by force and is resisting. But this constraint and force and vain violence manifest to my eyes that he is possessed. He is struggling against the Demon, and the incoherence of his gestures reveals his maladjustment: his foot stumbles on the sidewalk, he almost falls, and I know intuitively, by the simple contrast between his blundering haste and the slow, sure movements of the decent people about him, that he is a déclassé, an incompetent who has never been able, or never wanted, to submit to any discipline. I can read on this messy body that "Evil does not compromise." He has been struck and he is bleeding. His tormented face should tell me that he is weak, defenseless, that a pack has brought him to bay and bitten him. But I combine my loathing of Evil and my loathing of Blood. It is Evil that is bleeding, Crime is oozing from those wounds. And the look on his face expresses a state of daze (he has been half-killed), of fear ("What are they going to do to me?"), of anger ("They've hurt me!"), of shame ("All those people looking at me and yelling!"). But *to me* this state of daze is the sottishness of the alcoholic and the degenerate. Through his rage I touch Evil's inexpressible hatred of Good. His shame manifests consciousness in Evil. Five minutes before this fortunate encounter, Evil was still a merely abstract concept. A word was sufficient *to make me experience it.* A flesh-and-blood thief is crime accessible to all the senses.

Genet will never have this intuition. To be sure, he understands the meaning of the word. He has seen petty thieves being roughly handled by policemen. But he is condemned to read words in reverse. Honest folk give names to things, and the things bear these names. Genet is on the side of the objects named, not of those who name them. I am aware that honest people are also objects to each other. I am given names: I am this fair-haired man who wears

glasses, this Frenchman, this teacher. But if I am named, I name in turn. Thus, naming and named, I lived in a state of reciprocity. Words are thrown at me, I catch them and throw them at others, I understand, *in* others, what I am to them. *Genet is alone in stealing.* Later, he will know other thieves, but he will remain alone. We shall see that there is no reciprocity in the world of theft. This is not surprising, since these monsters have been fabricated in such a way as to be unable to make common cause.* Thus, when he is given this staggering name, he cannot make out its meaning in the persons of those who name him. It is as if a page of a book suddenly became conscious and felt itself *being read aloud* without being able *to read itself.* He is read, deciphered, designated. The others feel his being, but he feels their feeling as if it were a hemorrhage. He flows into the eyes of others, he leaks, he is emptied of his substance. He has *vertigo,* in the strict sense of the word. When we stand on a precipice and suddenly feel dizzy, we feel that we are slipping away from ourself, that we are flowing, falling. Something is calling to us from the bottom of the gulf. That something is ourself, that is, our being which is escaping from us and which we shall join in death. The word is vertiginous because it opens out on an impossible and fascinating task. I have shown elsewhere that certain extreme situations are necessarily experienced as unrealizable. Well then, Genet is unrealizable to himself. He repeats the magic word: "Thief! I'm a thief!" He even looks at himself in the mirror, even talks to himself as to someone else: "You're a thief." Is he going to *see himself,* to feel a bitter, feverish taste, the taste for crime that he gives off for others, is he at last going to feel his being? Nothing changes: a child scowls at his own reflection, that is all. Later, his creatures, one after the other, will stand in front of mirrors and name themselves: "I'm Erik Seidler, the

* The same absence of reciprocity can be observed among homosexuals. Every one of them has been called "homo" at least once in his life, and the name has remained graven on his flesh. He meditates endlessly upon the word. Moreover, he frequently calls other men homosexuals and is amused by them. A homosexual at the critical age will quite readily say: "I met an old queen. . . ." But they do not allow reciprocity of naming. A coal dealer, a chemist, a judge have an intuition of what they are when another judge, another chemist, another coal dealer is named in their presence. But the homosexual never thinks of himself when someone is branded in his presence with the name *homosexual.* His relationship to homosexuals is univocal. He is *the one* who receives with horror the name homosexual. It is not one quality among others; it is a destiny, a peculiar flaw of his being. *Elsewhere* there is a category of comic, shady people whom he jokes about with "straights," namely, the queers. His sexual tastes will doubtless lead him to enter into relationships with this suspect category, but he would like to make use of them without being likened to them. Here, too, the ban that is cast on certain men by society has destroyed all possibility of reciprocity among them. Shame isolates. As does pride, which is the obverse of shame.

executioner's lover." "I'm a German." "I'm a soldier." "I'm the maid." They want the word, in striking their image, to cause a crystallization, to make them see what a German, what a maid *is*. But the word scoots away, the image remains dull and all too familiar. Erik ends by taking out his revolver and firing at his reflection. Yet the solution is there, in the word. Genet is relentless. "I'm a thief," he cries. *He listens* to his voice; whereupon the relationship to language is inverted: the word ceases to be an indicator, it becomes a *being*. It resounds, it bursts upon the silence, one feels it running over one's tongue, it is real, it is true. It is a casket, a box with a double bottom which contains within it what Genet often calls "the mystery." If one could crack this nut, one would find inside it the very being of the thief; the being and the word are one and the same. The states of consciousness are thus changed into signs. They are a flickering that try to light up the darkness of the name. The latter, which, on the other hand, is dark, massive, impenetrable, has become the being which is signified. "Such-and-such an idea occurs to me, such-and-such a mood, desire, comes over me. Is *that* what's called being a thief?" The word, which was a means, rises to the rank of supreme reality. Silence, on the other hand, is now only a means of designating language. The trick is done: we have made a poet of the doctored child. He is haunted by a word, a single word which he contemplates in reverse and which contains his soul. He tries to see himself in it as in plate glass; he will spend his life meditating on a word.

One may say: "A word, what's a word? He has thirty thousand others. They're his as much as ours. All right, as far as 'thief' is concerned. But if I say that Genet is blond or short or French, this re-establishes reciprocity, for, after all, he can say about me what I say about him." But that is not true. If you touch a single word, language disintegrates in a chain reaction; not a single vocable is spared. The word "thief" is everywhere, extends through everything. Whatever you may say about Genet, *thief* is the permanent predicate of your propositions, and this suffices for him to be unable to apply the epithet to you. Do you assert that he is *blond?* That means: A thief is blond. But a thief is not blond as a decent man is. He is blond *as a thief*. Introduce an imaginary quantity into your calculations and all the results become imaginary. And so for Genet: as the original intuition of his being is denied him, all other intuitions concerning him are also rejected. He is absolutely *other;* all words designate what is manifest to others and hidden from him a priori.

Our familiar relationship to language makes it invisible to us in ordinary daily life. "We are so steeped in words," says Blanchot, "that words become useless." Words do not even have to be uttered between father and son, husband and wife, between workers on the same job, because things themselves cry them out to us. At the dinner table, my grandfather used to point silently to the piece of meat he wanted served to him. The gesture in itself was ambiguous, but we understood it immediately because it had, in the past, accompanied a phrase which gradually was dropped. Furthermore, even when we do use words, we pay no more attention to them than to our clothes or our fork. We speak in shorthand, in broken sentences. To speak is to pass over words in silence. But this invisibility of the Word obviously implies a deep understanding between those who are communicating. "If you do not act toward the utterances of others in accordance with the social norms of your age and milieu," says Brice Parain, "you have already ceased to be able to understand and interpret them." Now, the fact is that Genet has no milieu; he is alone. The norms set by society do not concern him. No more is needed for him to be astounded by the strangeness of human speech.

To be sure, there is not a single child who has not experienced this astonishment. When the poet Michel Leiris was little, he used to say *"reusement."* One day he was corrected: "One doesn't say '. . . *reusement,*' but *'heureusement'* [happily]." "The word which until then I had used as a pure interjection, without any awareness of its real meaning, was linked up with *'heureux'* [happy] and, by the magical virtue of such an association, was suddenly inserted into the whole sequence of precise meanings. The sudden apprehending of the complete word, which until then I had always slurred, took on the quality of a discovery. . . . It was no longer a thing that belonged to me alone. It partook of the reality which was the language of my brothers and sister and also of my parents. What had been a thing peculiarly mine became a common and open thing. All at once, in a flash, it had become a shared, or rather a socialized thing."*

But generally this astonishment does not last long. Usually it is precisely the Word which achieves the unity of the particular and the universal. If I talk about myself, I must universalize myself in order to be understood. Is not the very word "I" which I have just written a designation of myself and also of anyone? Words belong

* *Biffures,* p. 12.

to everybody; they are man himself as universal subject. If I say that I am unhappy, anyone will understand me, for anyone could have said and will be able to say that he is unhappy, and consequently, insofar as I *am understood,* I am anyone.

To Genet, however, there is no connection between the particular character that language has for him and the universal, socialized content of words. It is not even possible for him to express unambiguously the most immediate manifestations of his consciousness. He must have exclaimed more than once that he was unhappy, and his primary intention was to communicate knowledge of his state to others. What exactly was he trying to say? That he was lost within himself, that he was unable to feel guilty and that nevertheless he was making an effort to judge himself severely, that he seemed to himself to be both a monster and an innocent victim, that he had no more confidence in his will to mend his ways and that nevertheless he was horribly afraid of his destiny, that he was ashamed, that he wished his error were wiped away, though he knew it was irremediable, that he was longing to love, to be loved, that he was suffering above all from that ghastly, incomprehensible exclusion, that he begged to be readmitted to the community and allowed to regain his innocence. Now, that is precisely what is not communicable. To understand Genet's unhappiness really and truly would be to renounce Manichaeism, the convenient idea of Evil, the pride of being honest, to revoke the community's sentence, to annul its decree. The honest people would have to be ashamed of themselves; they would have to recognize reciprocity. The misfortune of a widow, of an orphan, that's something one is glad to understand: tomorrow we ourselves may lose our father, our wife, our child. These are recognized misfortunes that entail a ceremonial known to all. But to understand the misfortune of a young thief would be to recognize that I too can steal. The honest people obviously refuse to do this: "You shouldn't have stolen! You deserve what you got!" The decent man goes away, the child remains alone. Nevertheless, the remark is present, valid. It correctly designates his state of feeling. The child takes up the remark, repeats it to himself under his breath. The normal man expresses his unhappiness to others so as to be understood by them, hence to be like everyone else, whereas Genet, abandoned by all, repeats his lament without a witness so as to be understood by himself alone, hence to be more himself. Instead of the particularity's being socialized, it is the universal that becomes a means of achieving the particular. Or, to put it otherwise, he is trying to substitute himself for the missing wit-

ness, to be, for himself, someone else whom he informs of his suffering, someone else who, guided by the words, will make the intuitive discovery of his unhappiness as a *being*, that is, as an object. But the meaning remains stuck to the statement, for the purpose is to inform the other of what he does not yet know, and Genet knows only too well that he is unhappy. Thereupon the statement loses its indicative value. Falsely universal, falsely objective, it now serves only as a pseudo-communication, a pseudo-teaching. The words no longer designate the misfortune, they do not make it appear, they do not present it to the intuition of the other. The intuition of the misfortune exists in Genet long before he expresses it; it is his suffering itself, his actual suffering which words cannot increase or reveal. What purpose is served by his saying "I am unhappy"? To make his suffering exist in the absolute for a fictive witness. Dedicated to this phantom, the remark is transformed as the word "thief" was transformed. It contains Genet's being, his meaning, it is his misfortune become thing. He tries to impregnate it with his sufferings. But as the witness is no one, as Genet cannot be his own witness, it remains there, uttered and understood, an arrested flight toward nothingness; it contains, as it were, the being of the misfortune, that is, its objective aspect *for others*. But this very being, rarefied and evanescent, is, for Genet, only an absence.

His adventure is his having been *named*. The result has been a radical metamorphosis of his person and language. The ceremonious naming which transformed him, in his own eyes, into a *sacred object* initiated the slow progression that will one day make of him a "Prince of Thieves" and a poet. But at the present time he has not the slightest suspicion that he will glory in doing Evil. Overcome and bewildered, he merely submits. Referring to this period of his life, he will one day say that he was the football which is kicked from one end of the field to the other. He understands nothing of what is happening to him; he seeks himself gropingly and does not find himself. A dead child is smiling at him sadly from the other side of a glass, the paths leading to the woods are cut off. He is crushed by a horrible curse and guilt. He is a monster, he feels the monster breathing down the back of his neck, he turns around and finds no one. Everybody can see the huge bug, he alone does not see it. Other than all the others, he is other than himself. Child martyr, foundling, the others have hemmed him in, penetrated him, wander leisurely through his soul, like the judge, the lawyer and the executioner who entered Harcamone by the ear, descended to the

depths of his heart and left by his asshole. Genet is a crowd, which is nobody. It is the *reverse side of the setting,* the reverse of Good and of Good men's hatred of evil. Society is not more terribly present to anyone than to this child whom it aims to reject. He is not a man, he is a creature of man, entirely occupied by men. They have produced him, manufactured him out of whole cloth. Not a breath of air has been allowed to enter this soul.

Paralyzed by men's gaze, marked by man in his very depths and transformed by man in his perception and even his inner language, he encounters everywhere, between him and men, between him and nature, between him and himself, the blurred transparency of human meanings. Only one question confronts this *homunculus:* man. The child Genet is an inhuman product of which man is the sole problem. How to be accepted by men? How to become a man? How to become oneself? It is not freedom that he wants, any more than does Kafka's monkey which has been uprooted from its forest and locked up in a case. Oh no, not freedom! Freedom is a man's problem, a problem of a higher order; Genet is seeking *a way out.* But everything is so well contrived that he cannot find one anywhere. Whatever the behavior he adopts in an effort to reclaim the criminal that he *is,* his acts will emanate from this criminal and be able only to perpetuate him. Similarly, Stilitano tries to get to the exit of the Palace of Mirrors and collides with his own image everywhere. What is to be done? Reject the morality in the name of which he is condemned? We have seen that this was not possible. Turn in on himself and try to recapture his lost innocence? But since innocence comes to the child through others, since it is the others who have taken it away from him, only the others can give it back to him. Then should he submit? But to whom? And to what? Is he even asked to submit? Though the adults are prompt to condemn, they are in no hurry to absolve. If a man is a thief, he is theirs; if honest, he escapes them. What do they want of him? He is ready for anything. But the fact is, they expect nothing. They needed a culprit, they chose him, but they are quite unconcerned about what goes on in his mind. Let him be, if he likes, a good culprit, that is, not too hardened and not too ready to repent. Let him try to mend his ways, but without arrogance, and with relapses. Above all, let him realize that forgiveness is a matter of generosity; he will never be entitled to it, whatever he may do. It may be granted him one day out of charity. (Out of charity, in other words, out of caprice. The truth is that no one has the right to forgive.) Meanwhile, let him resign his freedom and put it into the hands of

those who condemn him, let him become their despised slave, let him worship them and loathe himself. Furthermore, he will gain nothing thereby, and if he thought he would that would be an additional offense. The child's suffering is so great that he asks nothing better than to conclude this bad deal. To obey, even without hope, to obey even a pitiless master, is also a way of escaping solitude. But the attitude which is imposed upon him is untenable. He is ready to hate himself if only he can manage to see himself face to face. But he never sees himself. His hatred, unable to settle on a real object, remains empty, abstract, acted rather than felt. Even his remorse is fake. Logically, the one who should repent is the child who stole. But this child stole innocently, and besides he is dead. The one who repents is the culprit they have manufactured. It seems to him that he is repenting the fault of another. In short, the culprit is asking the good man: "What must I do *to make amends?*" The good man replies: "Be abject." But, most fortunately, abjection *is not* a solution. In fact, it is the very state into which Genet has fallen and which he would like to get out of. He likewise rejects madness; the child is too upright, too real, too "willful" to make shift with imaginary escapes. He will consent neither to transferring guilt to other objects, nor to compensating for the original conflict by ideas of grandeur, nor to fleeing into a dream world. Madness does not pay. He did think of suicide. A little boy recently wrote to his parents: "Dear Daddy and Mama, I'm going to give you a nice surprise. I'm going to kill myself." And he did. The investigation concluded that the child had been mentally deficient. That was the best solution, unless the parents were sent to jail. I would bet that Genet must have thought more than once of giving his foster parents that nice surprise. The child steals, he is caught, he kills himself, that is, he carries the sentence of exclusion which society has delivered against him to its ultimate consequences. In so doing he anticipates the adults' desires and at the same time revenges himself on the adults, like the punished child who chastises his mother by depriving himself of dessert. It was, I think, Genet's optimism that kept him from adopting this conclusion in reality. I mean thereby to designate the very orientation of his freedom. Beyond certain limits of horror, honest minds are no longer sensitive to anything but the absurdity of the world. Their deaths are exemplary. But there are others who cling like vermin. Even in concentration camps they won't die. They have a deep, inner conviction that life has a meaning, that it must have one. The more horrible their situation, the tighter their grip. The more

absurd the world is today, the more necessary it is to hold out until tomorrow. Tomorrow, dawn will break. The present darkness is warrant of the fact. Genet is one of these. This austere and desolate soul has the will to survive his shame and is certain that he will win out. He will later say, in *Miracle of the Rose,* that in the most hopeless situations he always had an unreasoned conviction that they would offer a way out. But his original situation is the worst of all. And there is no way out of it. Since he does not kill himself, there *must* be one, despite the evidence.

# II

# FIRST CONVERSION: EVIL

## I WILL BE THE THIEF

Pinned by a look, a butterfly fixed to a cork, he is naked, everyone can see him and spit on him. The gaze of the adults is a *constituent power* which has transformed him into a *constituted nature.* He now has to live. In the pillory, with his neck in an iron collar, he still has to live. We are not lumps of clay, and what is important is not what people make of us but what we ourselves make of what they have made of us. By virtue of the option which they have taken on his being, the decent folk have made it necessary for a child to decide about himself prematurely. We can surmise that this decision will be of capital importance. Yes, one *must* decide. To kill oneself is also to decide. He has chosen to live; he has said, in defiance of all, I will be the Thief. I deeply admire this child who grimly *willed* himself at an age when *we* were merely playing the servile buffoon. So fierce a will to survive, such pure courage, such mad confidence within despair will bear their fruit. Twenty years later, this absurd determination will produce the poet Jean Genet.

So he has chosen the worst. He had no other choice. His life is all laid out: it will be a journey to the end of misfortune. He will later write: "I decided to be what crime made of me." Since he cannot escape fatality, he will be his own fatality; since they have made life unlivable for him, he will live this impossibility of

living as if he had created it expressly for himself, a particular ordeal reserved for him alone. He wills his destiny; he will try to love it. How did this solution occur to him? I do not know. It came from the heart, no doubt of that. Moreover, he had been preparing himself for it by the game of saintliness. As an abandoned child he wished to attain the inhuman out of resentment toward men. They are casting him into it. Perfect. It was certainly not *that kind of inhuman* that he desired. He wanted to transcend the human condition, and he was relegated to a level below humanity. But in any case he was ready for an exceptional destiny. He dreamt of ordeals surmounted, of asceticism, of endless torments. Here they are, the ordeals and the torments! Perhaps the road to the heights and the road to the depths are one and the same. Perhaps they meet somewhere outside the world. Surely misfortune is a cipher, surely it *indicates* something. But it is not a matter of understanding; Evil must be lived unto death.

This conversion can be situated between the ages of ten and fifteen. I imagine it kept beginning anew, over and over. Again and again the child pledged himself to Evil in a state of rage, and then one of his judges had only to smile at him and the decision melted in the fire of love. I imagine too that he was afraid, afraid of himself and of the future. Then, at times, he would writhe in his bonds, he wanted *to awaken.* "I wanted to back up. Stop! No go! . . . I wanted to turn back the clock, to undo what I'd done, to live my life over until before the crime. It looks easy to go backward—but my body couldn't do it."* And then, one day, he found himself converted, exactly as one finds oneself cured of a passion that has caused long suffering. Converted, illumined, confirmed. Impossible to turn back. The paradox of every conversion is that it spreads over years and gathers together in an instant. He decided to be what he was, or, to put it otherwise, the matter was decided within him. He seizes upon the curse which goes back to the depths of his past, of his mother's past, and which has continued to the very present, and he projects it before him: it will be his future. It was a constraint; he makes of it his mission. He saw it as the raw fact of a tainted heredity; it becomes a value, an imperative. I was a thief, *I will be the Thief.* That is my profession of faith, it will be my martyrdom. He needed rules, precepts, advice; he loved the constraint of Good. He will now establish a black ethic, with precepts and rules, pitiless constraints, a Jansenism of Evil. But he will

* Green Eyes, in *Deathwatch.*

not thereby reject the simple-minded, theological morality of property owners. His system of values will be grafted on this morality and will develop on it like a cancer.

Some may regard this attitude as the defiance of the sulking child who boasts of the misdeeds of which he is accused. And what if it were? Does anyone think that this ten-year-old was going to react like a man of forty? Certainly, if Genet chose this defense he did so because it was within his scope. But when a systematized, hardened sulking holds out for ten years, thirty years, when it is at the root of the most singular, the most beautiful of poetic achievements, when it changes into a world system, into an occult religion, then it must singularly transcend the level of a simple childish reaction, a man's freedom must be thoroughly involved in it. To many sensible persons who are quite aware of the relativity of mores and beliefs and who make an effort to practice tolerance, the old ideas of Good and Evil—of Evil, in particular, with its demoniacal flavor—will seem old-fashioned, antiquated, irritating in their puerility.* All the same, it is not Genet they should attack, but rather the peasants who brought him up. Genet retains these antique notions with which he was inculcated in his early years as if they were a carapace. But underneath he has matured, aged. He is not an old child, he is a man who expresses a man's ideas in the language of childhood. If we want to understand what he is today and what he writes, we must go back to this original choice and try to give a phenomenological description of it.

Let us first situate it, for it is historical, as is the slightest of our gestures. Little Genet cares not a rap about history. Later, he will substitute mythologies for it. Nevertheless, his conversion involves him in history, for it expresses both his particularity and that of our age, which are indissolubly linked.

One of the most manifest characteristics of contemporary societies is that they are composed of heterogeneous groups, some of which still display archaic structures and others of which foreshadow a future that we can barely imagine. In India, the most modern forms of industry coexist with the most ancient form of polytheism. The same individuals belong at the same time to the most diverse groups and refer simultaneously to symbolic systems of very different, often incommunicable, types. We know about the conflicts, the outlandish syntheses, the revolts to which these contradictory allegiances give rise in individual minds. In France, the

* I, for my part, do not go so far. Or rather I do not pose the question as they do.

contrasts are less pronounced.* Nevertheless, Genet's misfortune and conversion can be explained only by a *tension* between incompatible groups and ethical systems.

First, let us recognize that the pitiless and absurd sentence which is imposed upon the child can come only from a strongly knit group with a system of strict and simple prohibitions. Only such a community can react with righteous indignation—that is, by imposing diffuse, repressive sanctions—to the petty pilferings of a ten-year-old thief. Genet's "original crisis" can be understood only within a village framework. Later, he will feel disconcerted by the populations of cities. Intimidated by the urban proletariat, he will see the bourgeois as his natural enemies since it is they who make the laws and control the police, but it will be very difficult for him to find in their features the terrible visage of the Judge who condemned him for life. He will—not without a certain insincerity—accuse the liberal bourgeoisie, in particular, of not dealing with crime severely enough. The reason is that he does not find in the city the simplistic and puerile ethics of the countryside. He feels obscurely that he is in danger there, he is afraid of undergoing corrupting influences, of relaxing, of forgetting the hatred and despair that have become his reasons for living. In the city, among snobs or intellectuals, the moral and religious drama which he lived in suffering may come to seem to him an old anachronistic dream.

Yet it was the urban masses, bourgeois culture and, above all, the bureaucracy that, from a distance, exercised an attraction upon him and that facilitated his effort to liberate himself. In a purely agricultural society, he would have been irremediably lost. His conversion is not even conceivable if one does not imagine an incipient disintegration in the small village community which brought him up and then banished him. What saves the child is his obscure awareness that he has been *loaned* to these farmers. Not long before, he was grieved at not belonging to them completely, of not having been born amidst them, and it was this feeling of being *different* that led him to theft. At present, it is this same feeling that makes his condemnation less terrible. The child knows that he was born in Paris, that he belongs to an administrative body whose center is in the capital and whose network extends throughout France. He knows that his stay in the country is bound

* But one would find the strangest conflicts in the mind of an Italian "progressive" who was brought up in a Calabrian village and works in a Milan factory.

to be provisional and that, in accordance with its policy, the National Foundling Society will later recall him and apprentice him. He knows that he is dual in his objective reality: to the decent folk who surround him, he is an individual, little Jean, but somewhere in an office, four or five hundred miles away from his village, he is a number, *any child whatever*. This objective duality facilitates the effecting of the inner dissociation that will save him. If he is able to adopt a reflective attitude toward the propensities which are attributed to him, it is because he can find in his administrative anonymity a recourse against the particular idea that the villagers have of him. The peasants oblige him to *internalize* their sentence: he is an *evil* nature. Very well, but by the same movement he will internalize the objective indications conferred upon him by the National Foundling Society; the pure abstract number—assimilated, converted—which he is in the files of the Main Office changes into an abstract form of subjectivity. The foundling in Genet becomes a universal subject. In the period of sweet, natural confusion the remote existence of this Office acted like a leaven of anxiety in the child's heart because it prevented his integration into the group, but at present this urban, bureaucratic background furnishes him with a vague alibi, a recourse. He thus relives within himself the age-old conflict between the French city and countryside, and we find even in his works a primitive, almost archaic mythology, the themes of which are taken up and worked upon by a refined logic, by a townsman's sophistry. The following lines of Lévi-Strauss* are peculiarly applicable to him: "Every culture can be regarded as a body of symbolic systems in the forefront of which are language, marriage rules, economic relationships, art, science, religion. . . . [These systems] always remain incommensurable. . . . History introduces alogeneous elements into them, determines the shiftings of one society toward another and the inequalities in the relative rate of evolution of each particular system. . . . Any society is thus comparable to a universe in which only discrete masses are highly structured. Thus, in any society it is inevitable that a percentage—a variable one, be it added—of individuals find themselves placed, as it were, outside of any system or between two or more irreducible systems. The group asks and even requires that these individuals represent certain forms of compromise which cannot be achieved on the collective level, that they simulate imaginary transitions and embody incompatible syntheses."

* Lévi-Strauss: *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss.* (From Marcel Mauss: *Sociologie et Anthropologie.*)

Born in the heart of the city—in the fifth district—he is transplanted to the country. Driven from the country, he takes refuge in the city. Later, he will go from one to the other in order to escape legal prosecution, to get away from the police. Without fixed residence, without family, without work, even more of a vagabond than a thief, Genet, even in the fields, retains in his eyes the hues of the urban landscape. Even in the city streets he maintains close bonds with nature and the fields. Between these two groups which have not the same morphology, the same techniques, the same historical evolution or the same values he "represents a compromise which cannot be achieved," he "embodies an imaginary synthesis." That is why he is one of us, that is why he has "something to say to us." For we are all torn, like him, between the exigencies of an ethic *inherited* from individual property and a collectivistic ethic in the process of formation.

These considerations aim only at showing the objective factors of his sensibility. But the act itself whereby he takes a stand against the grownups and outdoes their condemnation is historical in its deeper intention. It is the typical reaction of all groups of untouchables when they have reached a certain stage of culture, that is, when they have achieved sufficient self-awareness to oppose their oppressors without having the means of imposing a change in their status. Lacking the means of overthrowing the existing order, they conceive no other and think only of demanding that they be integrated into the society which rejects them. But when they have realized that it rejects them forever, they themselves assume the ostracism of which they are victims so as not to leave the initiative to their oppressors: "It's not that you refuse to admit us, it's that we don't deign to join you." Their rebellion, unable to express itself by a concrete action, remains within the framework of a "dependency complex" and takes the form of an inner break. They admire nothing so much as the values, culture and mores of the privileged castes. They continue to view themselves with the concepts and according to the pattern furnished by their persecutors. But instead of bearing their stigma shamefully, they display it proudly. "Dirty nigger!" says a Negro poet. "Very well, I *am* a dirty nigger and I like my blackness better than your whiteness." In short, they become separatists because separation is forced upon them. This inner revolution is *realistic* because it maintains itself deliberately within the framework of existing institutions; the oppressed reckon with the real situation. They aim, as Descartes advises, to change themselves rather than the universe. But it is, at

the same time, *idealistic,* for it entails no real improvement in the condition of the pariahs. In limiting himself to willing proudly that which is, in transforming an actual situation ("I'm excluded from the group") into an ethical imperative ("Therefore, I must take the initiative of withdrawing"), the untouchable is playing the game of the privileged class. The original form of the proud, lonely and ineffectual demand, which might be called the ethical stage of revolt, is *dignity.* With dignity the oppressed contains himself, affectedly, within the bounds that have been set for him and that he cannot overstep even if he wanted to. He remains in his place conspicuously when nobody has requested him to leave it. Dignity makes passivity a challenge and presents inertia as active rebellion. It is liquidated whenever conditions exist for an actual struggle.

In the case of Genet as in that of untouchables, for example the Negroes of Virginia, we find the same injustice (the latter are grandsons of slaves, the former is an abandoned child), reinforced by the same magical concepts (the "inferior race," the "evil nature" of the Negro, of the thief), and the same angry powerlessness that obliges them to adopt these concepts and turn them against their oppressors, in short the same passive revolt, the same realism masking the same idealism. Genet's *dignity* is the demand for evil.

As a *realist,* he wants to win or lose in *this* world. Rimbaud wanted to change life, and Marx to change society. Genet does not want to change anything at all. Do not count on him to criticize institutions. He needs them, as Prometheus needs his vulture. At most, he regrets that there is no longer an aristocracy in France and that class justice is not more ruthless. If, thinking to please him, one transported him into some future society that gave him a place of honor, he would feel frustrated. His business is here; it is here that he is despised and vilified; it is here that he must carry out his undertaking. He loves French society as the Negroes love America, with a love that is full of hatred and, at the same time, desperate. As for the social order which excludes him, he will do everything to perpetuate it. Its rigor must be perfect so that Genet can attain perfection in Evil. In short, he is realistic because he wants what is, in fact because he wants to want it. To live is now to watch himself live. It is to acquire a deeper understanding of his condition every single instant, as a whole and in its details, in order to assume it unreservedly, whatever it may be. He takes his bearings every second. Duality is the permanent structure of his consciousness. He seeks *himself* and wills *himself.* His spontaneity dwindles. To feel and to watch himself feel are to him one and the same. He inspects

his feelings and his behavior in order to discover in them that dark vein, the will to evil. He checks them or drives them to extremes. He works away at himself in order to correspond more and more closely, every day, to others' opinion of him. Never again will he coincide with himself. Imagine a terrified cabin boy who has taken refuge at the top of a mast and who, from on high, is fascinated by the inky sea below, always ready to let himself fall into it and never letting go of the mast to which he clings. Such, henceforth, is Genet's inner landscape, although we must add that if the sea whips up enormous waves it is because the cabin boy is blowing on it. A passage in *Funeral Rites* will help us understand. Pierrot has inadvertently put a maggot into his mouth: "He found himself caught between fainting with nausea and dominating his situation by willing it. He willed it. He made his tongue and palate artfully and patiently feel the loathsome contact. This act of willing was his first poetic attitude governed by pride. He was ten years old."

He has to be able to "take everything," to dominate the situation. One can imagine in what an arid, desertlike climate this fierce will is going to make the child live. Rage, tears, despair, anything would be better than this fixed obstinacy. But Pierrot refuses to faint. Genet thrusts aside the idea of suicide and such substitutes for it as bursting into tears or fleeing into madness. He contains himself. Life becomes a choice; it is death, known, experienced and rejected. But the fact is that life is impossible; the *only* possibility was death. Henceforth, the child will therefore live in defiance of death, that is, in defiance of fact. Every pulse-beat will be conquered against the desire to efface himself from the world. He will be like Clément, that other hero of Genet who has just killed his girl friend and who undertakes to wall her up: "He worked like a sleepwalker, preoccupied and determined; he refused to see the gulf in order to escape from dizzying madness. . . . He knew that if he flinched, that is, if he relaxed that attitude, an attitude as severe as a bar of steel, he would have sunk. Sunk, that is, run to the police station and melted into tears." To sink—that is what Genet fears. To sink—to recognize the impossibility of his attitude, of his being, to become human again, to recognize men's gentle exigencies, and their tenderness. If he is only a man, he has lost; he will be unable to bear life. The runner of Marathon died long before reaching Athens. Though dead, he kept going. And so with Genet: he keeps going; if he stops for a moment, he will remember that he is dead. He contains himself; his extreme politeness, his prelate-like unction (shot through with lightning), his very violence, which is never a first impulse,

everything reveals that the will to live has everywhere been substituted for life. He does not know life's pleasures because in order to know them one must let oneself go; he does not drink because in drunkenness one abandons oneself. He dedicates himself to life; he enters it as one enters orders. This will to live must be as abstract, as rigorous, as pure as Kantian good will: and it is precisely evil will.

*Idealism:* all this leads only to verifying the grownups' judgment, just as the proud demand for "negritude" merely confirms segregation. Genet's "evil nature" existed at first only as a result of universal consent. His judges thought that they knew his nature, and Genet believed his judges. He now strives to create it. Each of his individual actions is going to give body to this phantom. He steals everywhere and against everybody; he is the despair of those who are bringing him up; he spares nothing and nobody. But this aggressiveness should not mislead us. It is purely defensive, it is the defiance of impotence. Genet steals because they think he is a thief. "Poetic attitude governed by pride." Perhaps. But he has also written: "Pride means nothing. . . . No pride without guilt." Pride is the reaction of a mind which has been beleaguered by others and which transforms its absolute dependency into absolute self-sufficiency. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that, around the age of fifteen, girls often force themselves to touch repulsive insects and sometimes put them to their mouths. One of the girls to whom she refers in *The Second Sex* resembles Pierrot rather closely. She had unwittingly eaten half of a worm that happened to be on a lettuce leaf; she made herself eat the other half. We know the reason for these exercises. Out of a mixture of hatred, curiosity and defiance, these adolescents are making an effort to perform symbolically and through their own initiative the act of deflowering, the obscure presentiment of which is sufficient to fill them with horror and which they know will be imposed upon them. Genet and these young girls have in common the fact that their only recourse is to will what is. In any case, the die is cast. Genet is a thief, the girls will be deflowered. Since they are unable to escape the future in store for them, all they can do is refuse to *undergo* it. Sentenced to death, they demand the right to give the order to fire that will kill them. Since men's contempt is inevitable, it must be provoked. A newcomer who does not know who I am is friendly to me. There is no time to lose. Any minute now people are going to start nudging him and putting him on guard against me. I've got to steal his watch or his money right away in order to disappoint his friendly

feeling for me, so that he will learn *from me* that I'm a monster.

This eagerness to discourage reciprocity will be called sneakiness, treachery. *We* know that it is *dignity*. To the "generous" whites who do not draw the color line the Negro says: "Come, come, you see very well that I'm a Negro. Remain in your place as I remain in mine." And Genet, in like manner, says to the bourgeois liberal who wants to help him, perhaps to "re-educate" him: "You see for yourself that I'm bad. The proof is that I've taken your watch." The common characteristic of these reactions of defensive aggressiveness is that they come too late. It is too late when Pierrot discovers the maggot in his mouth. Whatever he does, he will not prevent its having defiled him. Too late when Genet adopts the resolution to steal—he has already lost the initiative. When he launches his counterattack, the others have already organized their stand, they have occupied the avenues and public buildings. Before even dreaming of rebelling, he has already granted them the essential: that he is a thief and that theft is disgraceful. After that, his revolt is doomed to impotence and his most heinous crimes will merely justify the prison cell which they are preparing for him. Let him pillage, let him kill, he will provoke only one comment from his judges. "I predicted as much." Does he steal more often than he would have done if he had not been converted? Even that is not certain. He was condemned to theft, he would have stolen out of fear, out of resentment, out of confusion, out of bewilderment, out of need. Only one thing has changed, the inner meaning of his pilfering. In a carousel, a troop of horsemen are pursuing a rider. By dint of a supreme effort, the latter gains a few yards. He is equidistant from the vanguard and rearguard of his pursuers. This is perhaps enough for him to imagine that he is giving chase to them, but this is a point of view which remains personal to him. The Others will notice nothing.

Nothing! He has done nothing, they have seen nothing. This hard, cynical realism remains totally ineffectual precisely because it is striving to will the totality of the real. The pariah's intentness, his untenable contention, are, in the last analysis, only a change of mood. We shall deal more fully with this strange metamorphosis of absolute realism into absolute idealism. It is this transformation that will enable us to understand why the life of this evildoer who wants to be active, lucid and effectual has little by little changed into a daydream.

# I DECIDED TO BE WHAT CRIME MADE OF ME

We have situated Genet's decision in its objective bearings. We know what it is in *itself*. We must now see what it is for him, that is, as a subjective moment of his conscious life. What does this will to be evil mean to Genet himself, what is its intentional structure? As soon as we begin to approach the problem, we discover an insurmountable contradiction.

"I decided to be what crime made of me." In this seemingly very simple statement there is "to decide." But there is also "to be." Now, the purpose of a decision is to effect a change in the world; a decision goes beyond what already is toward that which is not yet. To decide to be a teacher is to prepare for the necessary examinations; to decide to be a soldier is to enlist. But if I already am a professional soldier, I cannot decide to be one, for this decision will not effect the slightest change in reality. And if I persist in willing that which is, my will, gliding over the real without finding anything to take hold of, unable even to begin to be implemented, changes into a pure verbal determination. How could Genet *will* to be evil since he believes that he is *already evil* by nature and that he has no means of preventing his essence from being or of making it be. Yet the word "be" assumes in his writing an active, transitive value. In the sentence which I have quoted, to be is to throw oneself into one's being in order to coincide with it. The word suggests a compromise between the calm coinciding of an object with its essence and the storm-tossed development whereby a man fulfills himself. And I am aware that I can yield to the urge of a calling and become a sailor or a poet. In that case, it can be said, not without a certain impropriety, that I have become what I was, that is, that

my life has gradually realized certain gifts which existed in me in the virtual state. But what if I already am what I am? What if I am enclosed, locked up, in my being? What can I *decide?*

The fact is, nothing is so simple. Obviously, if men existed in the manner of tables or chairs, there would be no question for them of acquiring their being. They *would be,* that is all. The twofold nature of Genet's undertaking comes from the ambiguity of our condition, for we are beings whose being is perpetually in question. Or, to put it otherwise, our way of being is to be in question in our being. Nobody is cowardly or brave in the way that a wall is white or a blanket green. To the most cowardly man, cowardice always manifests itself as a *possibility;* he can consent to it, reject it, flee it, find it even in actions that others consider daring, experience it without participating in it, etc. Thus, the paradoxical expression "to want to be what one is" can be meaningful: it may refer to the efforts we make to coincide with our being. In the case of Genet it would imply that he plunges with all his weight and force into the evil of which the others accuse him. And, no doubt, there *is that* in his decision. However, the fact remains that every decision emanates from a pure and unqualified freedom which aims at giving itself a being, though without ever quite succeeding. But the *being* which Genet thinks he has received from grownups is *already made.* As he sees it, it is a complex of real qualities and tendencies all of which impel to Evil. It is a *substance,* in the Cartesian sense of the word, as in the expression "thinking substance." It is his soul, the governing principle of his behavior, his entelechy. It is a *person* in the Latin sense of *persona*—I mean a mask and a role whose behavior and speeches are already set down. It is the Other, it is a "zar," which possesses him, an unconscious which, like that of psychoanalysis, proposes, imposes, uses trickery and outwits the precautions one takes against it. This complex reality has at least one simple characteristic: its being *is not in question,* it is stable and fixed, like that of objects. In short, it is a being *in itself* and *for others,* but it is not a being-for-itself. In his decision to be what they have made of him, Genet thus forcibly couples a pure will which will define him *afterward* by the totality of his acts, and a substance which is pre-existent to his actions and which produces them out of a kind of inner necessity, as consequences follow from a theorem. These two terms conflict: can one imagine a Spinozistic mode having abstract freedom in order to will or reject itself? All his acts of will issue from his being, and he cannot perform a single such act which is not implied in his being as the consequence of a

mathematical concept is implied in its definition. If Genet is a "nature," everything is comprised in that nature, including the movement he makes to turn to it and lay claim to it. If Genet has the power to claim his essence, then he also has the power to reject it, to change it. He is free, and his nature is only a myth or a decoy. In short, Genet wants both to make himself evil because he does Evil and to do Evil because he is evil. This contradictory attitude is obviously the effect of his pride. People heap abuse upon him because he has stolen and because he is bad. He replies, "Yes, I'm bad and proud of it," and at the same time, "Yes, I've stolen. And I'll steal again." Nevertheless, the fact remains that he wants *everything at the same time:* to generate Evil *ex nihilo* by a sovereign decision and to produce it by natural necessity. To be at one and the same time Satan and pestilence; to be endowed with free will and slave will at the same time and in the same connection. This is so because he desires the worst and because he does not know which is more abominable, a mind possessed, all of whose intentions turn, despite itself, to crime, or a free mind which does wrong knowingly. Unable to choose, he yokes two incompatible world systems: substance and will, soul and consciousness, magic and freedom, concept and judgment. If he is free, each of his acts contributes to the drawing of his figure, but one cannot say that he is evil before the moment of his death. If he is not free, he is totally evil at every moment of his life, but he is no longer guilty.

One can readily imagine the emotional drive that impelled the child to choose at the same time two attitudes which cannot coexist. He had to achieve self-mastery, autonomy of will, lest he go mad, and to find a sanctuary in which the Other had not already installed himself. To affirm his sovereignty was to save his mental integrity. Against the dark forces that were hemming him in and that he suddenly found within himself when he least expected, he had to cry out: But it's me, me Genet, me all by myself, who want what I want, who do what I do. But he had no intention of liberating from Evil the freedom of will he was discovering within himself. While affirming his autonomy in self-defense, he challengingly insists on his badness. *Yes,* he is free, they won't succeed in convincing him otherwise; *yes,* he is bad, and even more than they think.

Be this as it may, the two terms, united by the same psychic reaction, borne up by the same movement, are nonetheless irreducible. At times the substance will be dissolved in the will, and at others the will will be estranged from substance. The fact is that there are in Genet two irreducible systems of values, two tables of

categories which he uses simultaneously in order to reflect upon the world.

| 1. Categories of *Being* | 2. Categories of *Doing* |
|---|---|
| Object | Subject, consciousness |
| Oneself as Other | Self as oneself |
| Essential which proves inessential | Inessential which proves essential |
| Fatality | Freedom, will |
| Tragedy | Comedy |
| Death, disappearance | Life, will to live |
| Hero | Saint |
| Criminal | Traitor |
| Beloved one | Lover |
| Male principle | Female principle |

How can one be surprised at this duality of principles? Is not Genet himself an aberrant synthesis of two attitudes? As a product of both the naïve substantialism of rural areas and the rationalism of cities, does he not belong to two groups at the same time? As an anonymous ward of the National Foundling Society, he adopts the point of view of the universal, autonomous subject in order to consider the particular figure of little Jean Genet, adopted child of Morvan peasants.

This contradiction puts us into a difficult position. We ought, in all logic, to pursue our study from two points of view at the same time, but if we did we would inevitably fall into confusion. We shall therefore examine separately the intention of being and that of doing. In the present chapter we shall take Genet's conversion at its source and give a cross section of the two divergent intentions in order to make a surface examination of them in the instantaneousness of their emergence. The result will be, so to speak, a *static* description. But as we must not lose sight of the fact that these intentions coexist in the false unity conferred upon them by consciousness, we shall indicate, in a third section, the immediate and confused relationship that unites them.

However, this double decision does not remain inert. It lives, it changes, it grows richer over the years, it is transformed by contact with experience and by the dialectic of each of the components. We shall have to follow it in its evolution. That is what we shall attempt to do in the following chapters. There, too, it would be more in accordance with reality to study this pseudo-totality in its

syncretic wholeness. However, the overlapping of the dialectic of doing and that of being which, from without, influence and react upon each other would render our exposition unintelligible. We shall have to expound them separately, to follow them one after the other in their temporal development over the decade following the conversion and to determine the extent to which each of them contributes to *make the history* of Genet. In a later chapter of this section, we shall attempt to get our bearings and, having familiarized ourselves with Genet's double postulation, shall endeavor to bring these partial analyses together and, by a study of the reciprocal action of *doing* and *being,* reconstitute the concrete totality of this inner experience.

## *1. The Intention of Being*

He wants to have an intuition of himself. This subject wants to make himself an absolute object to himself; this consciousness wants to become both being and consciousness of being. Being is his desire, his wish, above all, his fundamental possibility. His life will be only an ontological adventure, and it is in terms of being that he will launch the challenge which will determine it: he does not say that he will steal but that he *will be* the thief. This thief is a stealing substance as the mind is a thinking substance. Men do not act: what we call their acts are simple attributes of the substance they embody.

The thing for him to do, therefore, is to *encounter* this substance which defines him. At the origin of this quest is a kind of passive and contemplative state of mind: one must be open to Being as the mystic is open to his God. Genet, haunted by that Other who is himself, senses the sacred through his own consciousness. The revelation of his Being will have the characteristics of a hierophany; it will wrest him from the human, from everyday life. It will be a religious experience, a communion. Is not the religious moment par excellence that in which a subjectivity, ceasing to disperse itself indefinitely in everyday reality, regains its eternal being, becomes a calm totality in full possession of itself? Eternity invades the state of flux, the absolute manifests itself, something new happens beneath the sun. Genet will escape from the trivial world of morality and reach the world of religion through a mystical experience. He has already set the conditions of the experience: he must encounter himself as what he is and as a *de facto* necessity. His being will be delivered up to him in an intuition of the same kind

as the Cartesian *cogito,* but broader, for he does not wish to discover himself as a simple thinking substance but as a sacred, demoniacal reality. The intuition will be not merely a fact of thought but also a fact of the heart, a sexual fact. It will be achieved only through the amorous resignation of the will, which must turn over and *open up,* for the eagerly awaited being is a person, the actual person of Genet, the active principle that makes use of him to commit his crimes. The garrulous and amorous consciousness will passively receive its visitation; it will enter the consciousness as a lover enters his mistress; consciousness will love this being as the woman loves the male, as the faithful love their God. Is not this love precisely the horror which has been overcome? It *will be his being* by virtue of a mystic marriage. The contempt and hatred of the Just will serve to cement the union. To love each other amidst hoots and jeers and to draw from that love the strength to feel invulnerable —that is the aim. We find here the postulation of the mystics which is often defined as the quest of a state in which subject and object, consciousness and being, the eternal and the particular, merge in an absolute undifferentiation. This little scrounger aspires to the sacred moment in which he will be penetrated, torn apart, by the great and terrible essence of the Evildoer and in which he will no longer know whether his consciousness is a simple phosphorescence of this eternal essence or whether the eternal essence is the object of his consciousness.

Nevertheless, his passivity has its limits. Like mystical quietism, like Bergsonian intuitionism, it must be accompanied by a systematic and discursive labor of *preparation.* The Miracle must be solicited, one must become a prey in order to tempt the angelic Visitor, or at least one must purify oneself so as to be worthy of his Visit. In the last analysis, it is on the world that one refuses to act. And not even that: one will launch upon undertakings if one foresees that they may have happy effects on one's inner life. In short, quietism is not so much total inaction as it is activity aimed at making us passive. Genet wants the swift stream of his consciousness to freeze and crystallize into being. By means of a rigorously observed etiquette he attempts to confer upon himself, in his own eyes, an objectivity that flees him. He works upon his feelings in order to endow them with the stubbornness, bareness, silence and plenitude of the object. While exalting his sensibility, he secretly withdraws from it and attempts to examine it with borrowed eyes. He publicly reveals his most secret purpose; his existence is a ceremony. Whatever he may do, whatever he may think, he dissociates

himself from himself and quickly makes himself Another in order to *catch himself unaware* as Another or to *be caught unaware* by his Other-Being. Thus, this too-deliberate passivity changes into willfulness. As a result of his wanting his states of mind to be too strongly felt, they are never entirely felt. At the core, so to speak, of this unbearable tension there is always an absence of the heart, a kind of distractedness. The reason is that he is *in a state of waiting:* both hunter and prey, he sets himself out like bait and lies in wait for the voracious bird to swoop down on him and be caught in the trap. While observing himself, he makes an effort to feel. It is not enough to be moved; the mental state must be perfect, as depraved and execrable as possible. On the one hand, he takes precautions against his feelings by becoming the spectator of them; on the other, he forces them in order to make them exemplary. Never again will he yield to passion, to surprise. Never again will he simply *feel* emotion as the result of an external cause. At most, certain events will be an opportunity for him to set in motion a complex and carefully adjusted mechanism whose purpose is to trap being. Between the world and him there is henceforth himself. As Gide has said, one can never know to what extent one feels and to what extent one plays at feeling, and this ambiguity constitutes the sentiment. Never has this been so true as in the case of this circumspect, close-grained little man who is bent on receiving only what comes from his will. He gains from these ceremonies a classicism of mind. Everything about him is measured, temperate, carefully wrought. This wicked and desolate soul has the look of a formal French garden. The Devil is classical.

This whole effort ends in failure. The soul is prepared for the visitation, but the angel does not come. It never comes; it is only an absence. Genet suffers continuously from this absence which dims the universe and preys on his mind. What he calls his Ego is this absence itself, the irritating indication of an intention forever promised and never fulfilled. It is a certain way of making appointments with himself at every corner, at every bend of the road, on all objects, in all gazes, and of never turning up, of remaining a fleeting silhouette on which a door has just closed and regarding which he cannot be sure whether he has caught a glimpse of it or merely assumed its presence. Thus, the decision to *be,* to receive his being like manna, in a state of blessed passivity, becomes a state of tension in a vacuum, a brief quest, vain and fruitless, a pure and abstract act of will. Since *being* is only the ever-retreating horizon of these minute preparations, the decision to coincide with his own

nature fades away, disclosing this unceasing activity of a lost soul or of an ant. Being gives way to doing.

## 2. *The Intention of Doing*

We suddenly move to the other extreme. What Genet now demands is the contrary of a Nature: the autonomy of his will. This ought not to surprise us. When he lays claim to the nature that is ascribed to him, he is defiantly defending himself against the presence of a tribunal which has wormed its way into his heart. But when he wants to change himself into a pure will, it is in order to retrieve his own life, which the others have taken away from him. Ever since he was caught stealing, he has been the plaything of external forces. He is hunted, locked up, released, locked up again, transported from one end of France to the other. It is as if a raging sea were tossing him from shore to shore. He lands nowhere. His life literally *has no direction.* What is it if not this absurd hustle and bustle, this useless hubbub, this roving, this superficial agitation? One might reply that at least he takes the initiative when he steals. Hardly so: the punishment is out of proportion to the offense. He *did not want* to be that parentless, degenerate child; he *did not want* to be condemned by the people of the village; he *did not want* the government officials to take him back, to put him into a reformatory, to take him out of it, to put him back again. As he later said, the thefts seemed to be born of circumstances themselves, of objects; things are sometimes laid out in such a way as to suggest a theft, to beget it in the thief's body. And as soon as the offense is committed, the social world reveals its true face: an "ineluctable" sequence leads him to prison. No, Genet does not have the feeling of being free. At times it seems to him that he is witnessing his own life as if it were someone else's.

That is precisely why he had no resort other than to determine to will it. Green Eyes struggled for a long time against the fatality that had made a murderer of him. In vain. But from the moment he "simply made the gestures that led him as quietly as can be to the guillotine," "everything was easy." Therefore, the only way for Genet to regain his life is to will it as it is. Not for this or that particular reason, not because it is beautiful or adventurous or tragic, but simply in order to manifest himself in it as a sovereign will. In ruining his hopes, in revealing existence to him as an irremediable succession of calamities, misfortune produced in him the same result as reflective analysis produces in a Kantian: he eliminated all

the imaginable motives of his act. Whatever he may spontaneously desire—wealth, happiness or simply tranquillity—he knows that such good fortune is forbidden him. Everything is born of Evil, everything turns into misery. Hence, the material content of his acts becomes a matter of complete indifference to him. It is not a question of willing this or that but of laying claim to whatever does harm to him in the world. Thus, there gradually emerges the notion of a pure will which wills itself unconditionally evil. The imperatives of this will might be summarized in four maxims:

1. "View each event, even—and particularly—if it is harmful, as if it were a product of your unconditioned will and a gratuitous gift which you had decided to make yourself."

2. "Let your chief motive be, on every occasion, the horror that your future act inspires in others and in yourself."

3. "Act in such a way that society always treats you as an object, a means, and never as an end, as a person."

4. "Act as if the maxim governing each of your acts were to serve as a rule in the den of thieves."

Is this a matter of a mere mental exercise without objective bearing? No, not quite. If he cannot improve his condition, he has leisure to make it worse. He will find a semblance of activity on the basis of his misfortune. He will strive to carry it as far as he can in order to be sure at least that he alone is responsible for it. Pierrot cannot prevent the maggot's being in his mouth, but he can suck it, he can eat it. Genet will invent exquisite tortures for himself, will refuse himself all hope, will impose vile contacts on himself, will besot himself with misfortune. He will have no tastes other than the distastes which he has overcome, and if he feels more delicate desires, he will tolerate them only in order to turn them into instruments of torture. Although it is pure freedom which is at stake in both cases, it would be an error to confuse this eagerness to desire the worst with Stoic will. If the Stoic declares that he *wills* the world, it is because he believes the world is good. But Genet feeds on misfortune and remains convinced that the universe is, at least for him, intolerable. His zeal recalls rather that of another solitary who cried out at Sils Maria that "all suffering wants eternity."

Since the decent folk depicted his destiny to him in the form of a radical and inevitable failure, since he loses his life, drop by drop, since it leaks out of him, since death will be administered to him by others and at a time chosen by them, Genet, in order to regain possession of his own existence, is going to make of this failure the product of his will. "He will make the gestures that lead him" to

prison, if not to the guillotine. This is a game in which the loser wins. As a result, this defeat, which has been prepared for, meditated, carried to an extreme, will change, in the esoteric religion of the Thief, into the finest of victories.

But why stop on such an evil path? Since he wills his own misfortune, he must also will Evil. It is not enough to accept his *evil nature,* for it might, if need be, serve as an excuse. Genet owes it to himself to reject every excuse. Thus, the resort to the unconditioned will suddenly damages the relationship to Being and Essence which Genet adopted earlier. It is no longer a matter of abandoning himself to his nature or of letting himself be carried along by it. What Genet requires is Premeditation and *Consciousness in Evil.* He does not, to be sure, deny this nature—moreover, he will *never* deny it—but he wants his will to precede it. In order to take the initiative again, Genet will anticipate the impulse which he feels coming on and will leap to the crime in order to get there first. It is a race. His accursed Ego follows on his heels, he beats it by a length. Formerly, the occasion made the thief; now, it is the thief who makes the occasion. He will choose to steal when he has no desire to, like the young girl who was exasperated at having natural needs and forced herself to drink when she was not thirsty. Thus, there develops within Genet, along with the theme of the "evil nature," that of the gratuitous crime and the unconditionally evil will. In making contact with himself in this pure will, Genet seems to be nearing deliverance: everything about him disappears, save freedom. He who chooses to be wrong and who knowingly persists in being so cannot rely on collective forces, on tradition, on truth or on any kind of being. For error is *nothing.* He exhausts himself in upholding a Nothingness in solitude. The unrecognized scientist or artist dreams of future approval. When he is dead, at least his memory will be revered. But the name of the man who wants to be wrong is writ on water. The memory of him will disappear from the world with his life. He falls out of history and out of the world. If he muses on the infinite succession of the human generations that will impugn him, each in turn, it is in order proudly to confer upon himself an infinite guilt. Nevertheless, this will, which is bent on denying the evidence and on rejecting being, burns alone in defiance of all, infinitely alone, and feeds on itself. Without it, a certain contradictory, nonviable thinking would not even have come into existence. Emerging from nothingness for the purpose of supporting nothingness, this freedom knows that it will return to nothingness and is glad that it will. It can thus set up against

history, which rejects it, a kind of negative eternity which is its own lot. Though rejected by all the forces of the world, crushed and finally annihilated, it did exist, and there is nothing the universe can do about it. It directs its negation against the universe; it shelves the universe. Stranded in failure, error and impotence, it decides, all by itself, against the world. Genet has felt this, and that is his greatness: he has willed his solitude, his exile and his nothingness. One step further and he would deliver himself from evil itself.

### *3. Doing for the Sake of Being*

To adopt a mental attitude is to place oneself in a prison without bars. One seems able to escape from it at any moment, and in point of fact no wall or bars can prevent thinking from going as far as it likes. But actually, at the very moment this thinking believes that it has *gone beyond* the chosen attitude and that it is entering the world by a new path, with a new point of view entailing new commitments, it becomes aware that it has returned to its starting point. The moment Genet is about to escape from Evil, his thinking deviates. Instead of remaining on the ground of pure will, he subordinates this will to his "nature." The shackle that seems to be opening closes again. The fact is that he wanted to go even further, but he did not realize that he was retracing his steps. He had been told that his nature preceded his will; he now intends to prove to himself that he willed this nature. Child without a mother, effect without a cause, the victim of misfortune carries out, proudly and rebelliously, the superb project of being self-caused. On the occasion of a particular offense, a gaze took him by surprise and established him as a perverse nature. Genet wants to wrest from this gaze its constituent power. He commits his thefts deliberately as challenges and constitutive acts. Each of them will be both a particular, utilitarian larceny and a ceremony that revives the original crisis in the absence of the witness. By virtue of this ceremony Genet symbolically gives himself his thief's nature. It is a repetition of the crisis and of the rite of passage, a death followed by resurrection. The child *kills himself* each time in order to *come to life again* as a thief in the presence of imaginary witnesses. He stole because he "was" a thief; he now steals in order *to be* a thief. From this point on, to steal means to him to *consecrate* his thief's nature through the sovereign approbation of his freedom. That is the reason why he will later call theft a *poetic act*. Indeed, the term

must be understood in its original sense of *poiein*. By means of theft Genet re-creates his nature and at the same time consecrates it. But in point of fact this signifies that he agrees to give others a hold upon him, that he voluntarily exposes himself to their gaze, in short that he utilizes his freedom as a pure universal subject to lower his status to that of object. And as a matter of fact, if he admires criminals so greatly, if he regrets his not daring to kill, it is because the act of murder changes the victim into a thing and, at the same time, the murderer into an object:

"Querelle [who has just committed murder] was the object of a world in which danger does not exist—since one is an object. A handsome object, motionless and somber, in the hollows of which —for the emptiness was resonant—Querelle heard it break into a spray, escape from him, surround and protect him . . . that astonishing object, resonant and empty, with the dark, gaping mouth . . . and whose knees were perhaps covered with an Assyrian fleece. . . ."

Querelle is alone with a dead body; the time is night; there is no one present to stare at his sailor trousers and wonder whether they conceal an Assyrian fleece. Querelle is an object *in the absolute*. Why? The rest of the passage tells us: to commit a crime is to make his objectivity exist in advance for the detectives who will conduct the investigation, for the judges who will deliver sentence, for the policemen and prison guards who will apply it. But what is this congealing of the subject into an object, this extinguishing of the lights of consciousness, what is it if not death? And, indeed, Querelle is a "joyous moral suicide." A dead person is a being who no longer exists for himself but only in himself, that is, through others' opinion of him. One kills in order to be able to speak of oneself in the third person: "Eh? Who am I? The monstrous soul of servantdom! . . . No, Inspector, I'll explain nothing in their presence. That's *our* business. It would be a fine thing if masters could pierce the shadows where servants live . . . that, my child, is our darkness, ours . . . neither you nor anyone else will be told anything. Just tell yourselves that this time Solange has gone through with it . . . you see her dressed in red. She is going out."

Solange is alone: neither Monsieur nor Madame nor the Inspector is present. They serve her as imaginary mediators, and she thinks that, through their phantom eyes, she can at last perceive herself as an object: "She is going out . . . she is carrying a torch . . . she will lead the procession . . ." Genet, stealing in solitude, is going to be confirmed in his being by causing a silent scandal. And all at once—a further degradation—he will employ his pure free-

dom in invoking, by a magical conspiracy, the depraved Ego into which he dreams of melting.

Erik, the executioner's lover, walks up and down the room. He is naked, he washes himself, he starts to dress:

"You're handsome! . . . Every instant he awaited the cry that would strike him sharply, proving that he had just attained a point of *striking* beauty . . . he fell into the habit of knowing he was very handsome, and little by little he came to regard himself as a being who could act only in accordance with a beautiful gesture. . . . There were times when he desired to be the executioner in order to contemplate himself and to enjoy from without the beauty which he emitted: to receive it."

It does not matter that the question here is one of Beauty and not of Evil. We shall see that they come to the same thing. Both beauty and evil are pure appearance posing as absolute being. What counts is the operation. Thereafter, Erik washes and dresses every morning as usual, he "strikes no poses," that is, he does not deign to take beauty as the conscious end of his acts. But subtly, peripherally, each of his gestures, without ceasing to have a precise, utilitarian and commonplace purpose, foretokens that it is going to elicit from a mouth a cry of astonishment. Thus, while absorbing himself in practical activities, he becomes in his own eyes, which are careful to take no notice, and through the intermediary of another, "a being who can act only in accordance with a beautiful gesture." Beautiful, that is: whose beauty is the source, the substance and the end. Similarly, Genet, who likewise does not deign to strike poses and who honestly aims to do Evil for Evil's sake, adopts, stealthily, the sophism by means of which the Others have hoodwinked him: "I am," he thinks, "a Being who can act only in accordance with Evil." And while he is absorbed in doing evil, he wants to take himself by surprise, to elicit from his own throat the cry of astonishment that overwhelmed Erik. His acts are traps for being; he gives his full attention to forcing a lock, but out of the corner of his eye he steals a glance at himself. With a bit of luck, being will shimmer in his gestures, will alight in his open hand, and Genet will catch it.

We are going round in circles: Genet called forth his "nature," he was on the watch for himself in order to take his being by surprise. The necessity of bearing adversity suddenly raises him to the point of pure will. He *wants to will,* he *wants to act.* But suddenly he relapses into his obsession: he wants to act in order to be, to steal in order to be the thief, to do Evil in order to be the evildoer.

Whereupon the moment of the act and of the sovereign will disappears. An act which one performs in order to *be* is no longer an act, it is a gesture. Let us go further: the evildoer wants Evil for Evil's sake, that is, as an unconditional end. But Genet does Evil in order to be evil. Evil is therefore not the unconditional end of his undertakings, it is the means which he has chosen of being presented to his "nature." But if he *does not do* Evil, he *is not* evil. He is acting evil.

Does that mean he never commits "evil" actions? No. We are simply beginning to understand the extreme complexity of his attitude. At times he changes himself into a pure and unconditionally evil will—he then does Evil for Evil's sake, in all sovereignty, in all gratuitousness—and at times the presence within him of his ontological obsession taints his will to Evil, degrades it, transforms it into pure play acting and changes his acts into gestures. Like the mad needle of a compass, he oscillates perpetually from act to gesture, from doing to being, from freedom to nature, without ever stopping.

These attitudes are going to live and be transformed: each will have its dialectic, its historical development, its symbols. The quest of Being is going to lead Genet to homosexuality and, beyond it, to a solitude bordering on madness in which he will be tempted, for some time, to make of his "nature" his own God. The will to will is going to doom him to betrayal and, beyond that, to an even worse solitude which he will call Saintliness. It is these two contradictory processes which we are now going to study. We shall, as I said earlier, have to examine them separately. But let us bear in mind that however far this double dialectic may lead us its only source lies in Genet's conversion, that is, in his decision to accept responsibility for and to assume, by all the means at his disposal, the double malediction that was laid upon him.

## THE ETERNAL COUPLE OF THE CRIMINAL AND THE SAINT . . .

Thus, Genet seeks his Being. He looks for it first within himself; he spies on his inner life. But nothing comes of it, for the spy and what he spies on are one and the same. The first failure helps us to understand the importance which mirrors assume for him. A mirror is a consciousness in reverse. To the right-thinking man, it reveals only the appearance he offers to others. Sure of possessing the truth, concerned only with being reflected in his undertaking, he gives the mirror only this carcass to gnaw at. But for the woman and for the criminal, for all relative beings, this carcass is what is essential. If Genet looks at himself in the mirror, it is not primarily out of homosexual coquetry; he wants to understand his secret. He will later define the soul as "that which escapes from the eyes, from the tousled hair, from the mouth, from the curls, from the torso, from the penis." Let us take this to mean the psychic meanings perceived objectively in the movements of a body. The soul is the *visible* body and, at the same time, it is the being in the back of consciousness. How, after this, can one be surprised at Erik's wanting to take his soul by surprise in the mirror? "Deep inside the dark mass of his somberly clad body he guarded the name Erik Seidler, followed by a magical expression." The magical expression is: "the executioner's lover." Erik rolls it about in his head without being able to apply it to himself: how can one give a name to a transparent and mobile consciousness which *is not* anything. But finally Erik sees himself, he is going to be able to name himself. He approaches, and his soul rises up to meet him. As soon as he perceives that "dark mass": "I'm the only one who's Erik Seidler!" This name has spoken from the depths of his being, as his soul spoke

from the depths of the mirror; it adheres to the dark mass, envelops it and clothes it in a dark phosphorescence. Murmuring "Genet the Thief," Genet gobbles up his reflection with his eyes. He tries to enjoy it. If only he could flatten himself against the glass so that the image could enter him entirely and he the image, if only he could, as Goethe says, put the whole outside inside and the whole inside outside, if only he could imbue that wandering soul with consciousness, could drown in the eyes of the Others and at the same time wrest his being from them in order to be possessed by it.

Vain efforts. No doubt the image of Erik appears to him at first to take on a semblance of objectivity. The mirror is as personal as an eye: "the seven bulbs of the chandelier and the four lighted bracket lamps" impart to the reflection a pompous brilliance which metamorphoses it. It is "the sparkling image of a warrior lit up with wine." For a second, Erik thinks he "is another." He finds himself to be "so handsome that he doubts that the face is his. . . ." He makes a gesture to subjugate and possess the male, to merge with him in an amorous embrace, but the mirage immediately disappears. The image docilely reflects his gesture. It is servile, inconsistent, relative, neither quite himself nor quite another. It is the impossible objectivity. He "is within an ace of losing his reason in the presence of his own beauty." He takes out his revolver and fires, in a panic at being unable to be either one or two. Narcissism? No doubt, but narcissism is not primary, any more than is pride or homosexuality: "One must first be guilty." Narcissus is at first bewitched; his being has been stolen from him. The mirror is the eyes of Others, and the dream of Narcissus expresses his secret will to pluck out those eyes and graft them on himself.

The glass is shattered, and Genet's failures teach him a lesson: one does not coincide with oneself without mediation. The mirror was an illusory mediation, but it incites to a quest of the true mediations which would confront Genet with himself and be eliminated immediately thereafter: since the thief is forbidden to enjoy his being and since others enjoy it insolently, if only he could at least possess those who possess it. Unable to enjoy it himself, if only he could enjoy the Other who enjoys it!

There is the scene in which Erik is getting dressed in the presence of his lover: "There were times when he desired to be the executioner so as to be able to contemplate himself and to enjoy from without the beauty which he emitted, to receive it."

This passage and any number of others prove that Genet has dreamt *of being loved.* Cannot a loving consciousness achieve what

the chandeliers and bracket lamps and the psyche were unable to? In such a consciousness and in the unity of a common act of love, the beloved becomes an opaque fact and a pencil of rays that sparkle with meanings, he becomes a soul and a magical naming. His soul is his body in the heart of the Other, a glorified body, without parts, whose substance is the love that has been vowed to it. It is for this submissive heart that the Thief will be terrible and adorable; the fleeting feelings which he does not quite succeed in feeling have, for this heart, the cruelty and density of a beautiful stone. And—height of happiness—this receptacle of his image is there for the taking. It yields itself up, it opens out. The evildoer can grasp and feel that body which is only a temple in which he is worshiped, he can search it with his eyes, penetrate it with his tongue or penis in the hope of thrusting far enough to join his being. If, on the other hand, he allows himself to be caressed, he enjoys himself through the other's excitement. The lover, however, flees himself and forgets himself until he is only an absence; he is not in the way; he is now only the love which the beloved feels for himself. The tough Darling Daintyfoot "plunges into Divine as into a mirror and the slightly flabby beauty of his sweetheart tells him, without his understanding it quite clearly, of the nostalgia for a dead Darling, buried in great state, and never mourned." Gabriel the handsome soldier "lets himself be worshiped without batting an eyelash. He doesn't mind." Divine says to him: " 'I love you as if you were in my belly,' " and also, " 'You're not my sweetheart, you're myself.' " And Gabriel, "thrilled, though smiling with pride, replies, 'Oh, you little hussy!' " The beloved feels only indifference toward the lover. Since he is seeking only himself, it matters little to him whether he gazes into those eyes or others. What is Divine to this handsome male who lies stretched out with his eyes closed, who pretends to be dozing while Divine strokes him? A hand, any hand, all hands. The particularity of his lover escapes him. In fact, he asks it to represent generality. Man or woman, all is grist to his mill. In public, he acts as if he were a seducer of women, but he often allows himself to be adored, in secret, by a man. Women, who, like him, are victims and, like him, are condemned to *be,* do not have enough prestige to symbolize for him the society that has excluded him. Since it is men who make the law and who arrogate to themselves the right to judge him, only the submission of a male can redeem him, by humiliating in his presence his entire sex. Hence, Darling's proud cry: "A male that fucks another male is a double male!" In like manner, Genet

will later be able to define the love of which he dreams as "consciousness of the separation from one person."

Can it be that this love is salvation? No. We shall see later that the lover is falsely inessential, for it is he who controls the other's being. Fascinated by his own image, Narcissus drowns in the eyes that adore him. In any case, Genet will never have an opportunity to have this experience. He is not and never will be called upon to play the role of the beloved. As they say in the theater, "He's not right for the character."

He is fifteen years old.* He has become what they wanted him to be: a hardened thief. The authorities examine the case and decide that his apprenticeship is over and that it is high time to send him to his post. They take him and throw him into jail and from there into a reformatory. The matter is settled. It does not require much imagination to guess what he suffered. Thus far, his exile has been only a moral one. Now he is being confined. They are cloistering him, they are cutting him off from the universe. The doors have closed upon him. He contemplates with terror the new world in which it has been decided that he is to pass his life and that other society which will henceforth be his. Firmly resolved to be submissive to nothing, bent on willing the fate which he has been assigned, he is about to decide to adapt himself to his new existence. But before he has had time to catch his breath, "the miracle of horror" has already occurred: that other society of castoffs, of dregs, that excremental society, rejects him.

"I suffered cruelly, I experienced the shame of having my head cropped, of being garbed in an unspeakable outfit, of being assigned to that vile place. I knew the contempt of the other inmates, who were stronger or more evil than I."

Condemned by Good, scorned by Evil, he is driven to the confines of two enemy societies which shuttle him back and forth. His sense of shame increases. His bourgeois ways, which he has not quite lost, cause him to feel cruelly the humiliation of being shorn and being dressed in an unspeakable outfit. But if he wants to find comfort in the thought that he has willed Evil with all the consequences that it entails, then he must admit to himself that he has found something more evil than himself. He is too young, too soft, too weak, too cowardly. Which means, above all: too gentle and

* In *Miracle of the Rose,* Genet writes: "When I was taken to the Mettray Reformatory, I was fifteen years and seventeen days old. . . ."

too conscious. The truth of the matter is what Green Eyes will later say to Lefranc: "You're not our kind." They badger him, they insult him, they brutalize him. He becomes a butt.

"I was sixteen years old. . . . I kept no place in my heart where the feeling of my innocence could dwell. I recognized myself as being the coward, the traitor, the thief, the homo that they saw in me. . . . With a little patience and reflection, I discovered within myself sufficient reason for being called by those names. It appalled me to realize that I was composed of filth. I became abject."

How could he be loved? By whom? They spit in his face. He dares to gaze upon the meanest and handsomest hoodlums, but he has not the audacity to want them to love him. He knows only too well that he is not lovable. The passionate decision to will his destiny imparts a kind of cynical and brutal realism to all his thoughts, all his desires, even to his dreams. Even in his dreams he endeavors, as Descartes says, "to conquer himself rather than fortune." And besides, those glamorous boys are not meant for loving. Surrounded by a court of admirers, they are the handsome object of everyone's attention. They are absolute ends, and as such they gather and fix upon themselves all the scattered love that floats within the four walls. They are, by nature, the beloved. Genet immediately effects one of the extraordinary reversals at which he is an old hand. While deciding, in accordance with the discipline he elaborated a few years earlier, "to say yea from the bottom of his heart to every charge brought against him," he makes a zealous effort to love those who despise him. Precisely because he is alone and wretched, because he is dying to be succored, to be comforted, because he has a fabulous need to *receive* love, he decides to *give* it. He adores all those cruel, handsome children who plague him mercilessly, he adores them, he servilely submits to their desires, he becomes a doormat. Since he is unable to be the beloved, he will become the lover. A strange operation, in which the most abject humility disguises the most stiff-necked pride, in which the most utter love masks the most corrosive hatred. If we succeed in grasping the meaning of this, we shall be very close to deciphering Genet's secret: his passive homosexuality.

Not that it is to be dated from this new choice. He himself has informed us that, as far as he remembers, he felt his first homosexual desire—a quite innocent desire aroused by a handsome child on a bicycle—at the age of ten. He has even written that his homosexuality preceded his stealing and that the latter was merely a consequence of the former. But we cannot follow him in this. I can very

well imagine that it flatters his self-esteem to trace his pilferings, which are more external and vulgar, and which might, after all, have sprung from the occasion, to a deeper, more singular, more autonomous taste. But since, by his own confession, he stole before having relations with boys, even before desiring their caresses, we cannot help but regard his claim as merely the effect of a pious wish: if he wanted to support it, he would have to project his homosexuality, without proof, as some kind of metaphysical virtue beyond his memories. I quite recognize that at the present time he is more essentially a homosexual than a thief. But what does that prove? One of the constant characteristics of the psychic life is the fact that later determinations act upon earlier ones, envelop them and endow them with a new meaning. At present, Genet is perhaps a thief because he is a homosexual. But he became a homosexual because he was a thief. A person is not born homosexual or normal. He becomes one or the other, according to the accidents of his history and to his own reaction to these accidents. I maintain that inversion is the effect of neither a prenatal choice nor an endocrinian malformation nor even the passive and determined result of complexes. It is an outlet that a child discovers when he is suffocating.

Genet's early states of sexual agitation—those he experienced before entering the reformatory—must be regarded as rehearsals, experiences and experiments, not as manifestations of a bent. Can any man maintain that he never dreamed, in childhood, of caressing a playmate? And what of it! And even if there were an actual exchange of caresses, would that be a reason to speak of homosexuality? It is only afterward that these tentative efforts take on meaning. When the individual definitively takes one path rather than another, "the retrospective illusion" then detects in them the premonitory signs of disorder or decides to regard them only as inconsequential deviations. Inversely, our inventions are mainly decisions and clarifications. What we think we discover in a moment of special insight is what we have been inventing for years, bit by bit, absent-mindedly as it were, without being completely involved. Following close upon his early thefts and his original crisis, Genet's homosexual desires were at first merely "experiments just to see," attempts to discover, on the periphery of his fundamental decision, a safety exit. But if he desired boys, he did so with a kind of innocence. The passage which we quoted above makes this quite clear: applying to his new state the severe discipline which he had elaborated five years earlier, "I recognized myself," he says,

". . . as being the *homo* that they saw in me. . . . With a little patience and reflection, I discovered within myself sufficient reason for being called by that name." This means that he had never previously considered himself an invert. The illumination which establishes himself in his own eyes as a "homo" cannot be distinguished from the will to become one, that is, to give his past a meaning and a name and to consider it the preformation of his future. Deciding both to be the lover and to claim the insulting name of homo, Genet *learns,* by this very decision, that he has always been an invert. By the same token he realizes that the safety exit merges with the main exit: to want to be *the* thief and to decide that he will be a homosexual are one and the same thing. If his first sexual experiments had not been games, even if shared, and dreams, he would have realized this earlier. In any case, the will to Evil is primary, and, even though he may claim the contrary, Genet is well aware of this. Let us bear in mind, rather, Querelle, his hero: if he decides to be caught by Norbert, he does so after having killed and because he has killed.

As a result of his original crisis and of the ensuing decision, Genet finds himself immersed in a situation that might be called prehomosexual. Even if he had never subsequently slept with a man or dreamed of doing so, he was marked, set off. He would have remained, like so many others, a Vestal of homosexuality. Like the trim, smart, nimble, graceful banker whom everyone took for a fairy and who was always getting involved in long-drawn-out affairs with women without even suspecting the existence of forbidden love, until a chance debauch revealed it to him at the age of forty and thereupon changed him retrospectively into *what he was.* Sexually, Genet is first of all a raped child. This first rape was the gaze of the other, who took him by surprise, penetrated him, transformed him forever into an object. Let there be no misunderstanding: I am not saying that his original crisis *resembles* a rape, I say that it *is* one. The events which strike us take place at the same time on all levels of our mental life and express themselves, on each level, in a different language. An actual rape can become, in our conscience, an iniquitous and yet ineluctable condemnation and, vice versa, a condemnation can be felt as a rape. Both acts transform the guilty person into an object, and if, in his heart, he feels his objectification as a shameful thing, he feels it in his sex as an act of coitus to which he has been subjected. Genet has now been deflowered; an iron embrace has made him a woman. All that is left for him is to put up with *being.* He is the village whore; everyone can have him at

will. Undressed by the eyes of the decent folk as women are by those of males, he carries his fault as they do their breasts and behind. Many women loathe their backside, that blind and public mass which belongs to everyone before belonging to them. When they are grazed from behind, their excitement and their shame will mount together. The same holds for Genet. Having been caught stealing *from behind,* his back opens when he steals; it is with his back that he awaits human gazes and catastrophe. Why be surprised if, after that, he feels more like an object by virtue of his back and behind and if he has a kind of sexual reverence for them? The guilty child has been unmasked, possessed, and it is as a culprit that he will experience excitement and desire. And since he wills to become what they have made him, that is, an object, this willing will have repercussions even in the way he feels his body and the erection of his penis. To the man who makes himself a hunter, his penis is a knife, but to the one who becomes an object, it is a still life, a *thing,* which hardens only so as to give a better grip and to become easier to handle. It is typical that Proust, who was a homosexual, never called the penis a sword or a scythe, as do our village Lotharios, but a "clamp."* The turgescence that the male feels as the aggressive stiffening of a muscle will be felt by Genet as the blossoming of a flower. Whether it be the swelling up of an inert air chamber or the unsheathing of a sword, nothing is decided in advance: the entire choice which one makes of oneself gives its meaning to this inner perception. One man feels his transcendence in his penis; another, his passivity. And, in point of fact, it is quite true that an erection is a hardening, a spurt, but it is also true that this induration is undergone. The raw fact is ambiguous; the meaning depends on the individual. But the male swoops down on the female, carries her off, subjects her and feeds her. The very way in which he makes love reflects his economic situation and his pride in earning his living. Where do you expect Genet to get his pride? He does not earn his living, he loses it. Parasite of a society that denies him salvation through action, excluded from all undertakings, where would he find that mixture of oppressive imperialism and generosity which at present characterizes manly sexuality? The male rarely wishes to seduce by his physical qualities. He has received them, not made them. He makes his woman love him for his power, his courage, his pride, his aggressiveness, in short he makes her desire him as a faceless force, a pure power to do and

* Another homosexual has called it "a slug" in an excellent but unpublishable short story.

take, not as an object agreeable to the touch. He seeks in submissive eyes the reflection of his infinite freedom. But the acts of Genet, who does nothing, who undoes, who acts only in order to be, are effectual only in appearance. They reveal not his force but his essence. They are *gestures*. He says about Divine: "She tried for male gestures . . . whistled, put her hands into her pockets, and this whole performance was carried out so unskillfully that in the course of a single evening she seemed to be four or five characters at the same time." Divine is himself. He displays himself, he makes himself an object. That being so, how could he take? And what need has he of a woman, that other object which competes with him? All they could do would be to dance in front of each other, each wanting to be taken, not to take, to be seen, not to look.

This priority, in the subject itself, of the object over the subject leads, as we see, to amorous passivity, which, when it affects a male, inclines him to homosexuality.

In short, Genet decides to *realize* his being and knows that he cannot achieve this result unaided. He therefore resorts to the mediation of others. This means that he makes of his objectivity for others the *essential* and of his reality-for-himself the inessential. What he desires is to be manipulated passively by the Other so as to become an object in his own eyes. Any man who places his truth in his Being-for-the-Other finds himself in a situation which I have called prehomosexual. And this is the case, for example, of many actors, even if they enjoy sleeping only with women.

But in the case of Genet there is something else; he is inclined to homosexuality by other factors. Before there was any sexual determination, Genet reacted to his condemnation by effecting an ethical and generalized inversion. He was, as he has said, turned inside-out like a glove. Since he has been cast into nothingness, it is from nothingness alone that he wishes to derive. He is a monster, the exception to the rule, the improbable, in fact the impossible. He is an undesirable, born not of man but of some incubus. He cannot found a family. Thus, he has not only been exiled from the fields, woods and springs, he has been excluded *from his own nature*. We bathe in our life, in our blood, in our sperm. Our body is a dense water that carries us along; we have only to let ourselves go. A lowly Venus who is hardly to be distinguished from digestion, from respiration, from the beating of our heart, gently inclines us toward woman. We have only to trust her. The servant goddess will attend to everything, to our pleasure and to the species. But Genet *is dead*. His life is no more *natural* than his birth, it haunts a corpse. He

hangs on only by power of will. If he pays any attention to the muted sensations which come to him from his organs, he feels impossible and falls into astonishment. He does not find within himself any of those powerful instincts that support the desires of the decent man. He knows only the death instinct. His sexual desires will be phantoms, as his life itself is a phantom. Whatever their object, they are condemned in advance. He is *forbidden from the beginning* to desire. All societies castrate the maladjusted. This castration can be actually physical or can be achieved by persuasion. The result is the same. The desire of Genet, who is condemned, outside of nature, impossible, becomes a desire for the impossible and for what is against nature. And since this outcast child is only an appearance, his sexuality itself must be a sham, a trick of nothingness. None of the ordinary sources can determine it; it does not emanate from universal nature; it does not have its roots there. The fact is, it is up in the air, a pure, diabolical imitation of the legitimate movements of our senses. In assuming his situation, Genet takes his stand on absolute particularity; he will derive only from himself. This upheaval affects even his sexuality. His contorted desire, sharp and nervous, derives only from itself. It can have no natural relationship with its object. And since Genet's sincerity is the demand for artifice, his excitement will be all the more sincere insofar as he feels more artificial, more free. He does not know abandon, swooning. If he lets himself go, he falls into a pit. Thus, *he does not abandon himself* to sexuality. On the contrary, it appears at the maximum of tension. At the height of passion it retains a taste of ashes and freedom. And since negative freedom and Evil are one and the same, his sexual life is a new field which opens out to his perversity. Desire of nothingness, nothingness of desire, exhausting effort of the entire being, sterile, rootless and aimless, Genet's sexual desire contains within itself a fierce demand for its autonomy and singularity, in defiance of the rules, in defiance of nature, in defiance of life, in defiance of the species and in defiance of society. It will reflect him completely in the realm of the flesh.

Such is the situation that has been created for him. And though it inclines him strongly to homosexuality, it does not yet determine whether Genet will be a boy queen or a girl queen. It is here that the aforementioned upheaval occurs. Genet, who is the butt of the young big shots of the reformatory, is metamorphosed into a lover, that is, into a woman. But why? We have seen what the beloved gains in playing his role: he is magnified in the lover's heart. He is

sheltered, saved. But what of the lover? Why does he demand disgust and rebuffs, the other's indifference, the tortures of jealousy and, in the end, the despair that comes from the certainty of not being loved? And yet he must have something to gain by this. What is behind it all? For Genet, the answer is clear: love is a magical ceremonial whereby the lover steals the beloved's being in order to incorporate it into himself:

"The earliest form of love that I remember is my desire *to be* a pretty boy . . . whom I saw going by."*

The earliest, perhaps. But Genet adopted it later. Divine says to Gabriel: "You're myself," and Gabriel, decent chap that he is, smiles fatuously without realizing that his blood is being sucked from him. And the lieutenant's passionate, fierce love of Querelle is the desire to take away his penis and testicles and graft them on himself.

To those who have a sense of belonging, to the just, to the honorable, this identification may seem a vain and absurd endeavor. But I would like to ask them whether they are quite sure of being themselves. How do I know that they have not obtained that inner peace of theirs by surrendering to a foreign protector who reigns in their stead? I know that the man whom I hear utter the words "We doctors . . ." is in bondage. This *we doctors* is his ego, a parasitical creature that sucks his blood. And even if he were only himself, there are a thousand ways of being delivered to oneself as to beasts, of feeding with one's own flesh an invisible and insatiable idol. For nobody may say the simple words: I am I. The best and freest of men may say: I exist. Which is already too much. For the others, I suggest that they use such formulae as: "I am Himself" or "I am so-and-so *in person.*" If they do not aim at changing their skin, it is because the force that governs them does not allow them the leisure to do so; above all, it is because society has long since recognized and consecrated this symbiosis by according glory or simply honorability to the couple formed by the sick man and his parasite: it is a legitimate hell. As for me, I keep away from them if I can: I don't like inhabited souls. But as for the children of Cain, who are the horses of a zar that society reproves, I understand their longing to change masters. And it is no more vain to long to become "that gentleman going by," as Fantasio desired, than to want to be *the* doctor when one practices medicine. The two operations are of the same nature, and failure is certain in both cases. If, for your-

* Cf. Cocteau, *Le Grand Écart* (*Œuvres complètes*, I, 15): "Ever since childhood he had felt the desire to be those whom he found beautiful, not to be loved by them."

self, you are already the Other, if you suffer a perpetual absence at your very core, then you can live this absence as if it were that of any other. That other will never be more absent than you are, for the way in which he is not himself (that is, in which he himself is, for himself, Another), the way in which you are not you and the way in which you are not he do not differ appreciably.

Genet, too, suffers at never keeping the appointment. He, too, is haunted by an unrealizable intuition, as by a sneeze that neither comes off nor fades away. He is an empty palace. The tables are set, the torches lit, the beds made, footsteps resound in the corridors, doors open and shut, the glasses and plates are found empty, orders are left on the table, but no one ever appears. He has lain in wait, set traps and placed mirrors: all in vain.

But that invisible Other who prowls behind him and who cannot be taken by surprise, why may it not be *that hoodlum?* That charming young hoodlum passing by is no doubt a stranger to him, but not more of a stranger than Genet is to himself. He is an external object, an animated body. But what is the Other, the one absent from the deserted palace, what is he if not an object? Is it not the dark, terrible bulk that Erik saw in the mirror and *that was called Erik Seidler?* The little "tough" is insensitive, rebellious to Genet's will, to his voice, even unpredictable. But do you think that Genet's "Nature" obeys him? Quite the contrary, it governs him. So let the hoodlum govern him, let him impose his will upon Genet. He has a manifest superiority to the invisible Lord: although he *is not* Genet, at least he is present to him. Let him be as much of an object as one likes, but at least he is given to Genet, precisely for that reason, in an intuition that satisfies all the senses. Genet is *full of him.* In short, he has brusquely passed *in front of* the Other whom Genet wished to get at from behind himself. Is he not indeed a hoodlum, a thief, desolate, wicked? Does he not come to Genet from the dark, formless depths of the universe as the reflection came to Erik from the depths of the mirror? Or rather as Erik came to his reflection from the depths of the room? For in order that the hoodlum become for Genet his being, Genet must become the reflection of the hoodlum. His consciousness turned like an eye toward the darkness within. If it had been able to *manifest* that Other at the back of his head, to surround it, to illuminate it with its rays, and if the latter had had manifest reality only because of the brightness thus shed upon it, the trick would have come off. The reversal will thus consist in directing the eye of consciousness toward the appearance *from in front* and in emptying conscious-

ness of all concerns other than that of *manifesting* the handsome youngster. The reflective consciousness must fall back into the immediate consciousness and fade out there. For the reflective consciousness was a flashlight that searched the immediate consciousness with the aim of discovering the Other there. But it failed in its task and could only produce a paltry Ego. Let it drown and let Genet's Ego go down with it. His Ego no longer dwells in his consciousness. It strolls about on the legs of a handsome hoodlum. But that is not enough. Empty and anonymous, the immediate consciousness is still a consciousness of the entire universe. If it reduces the diaphragm, if it sees nothing but the beloved, if it is fascinated by him, as is a bird by a reptile, as was Rousseau, at certain times, by the entire world, if it falls endlessly toward him and feels itself falling, if it is convinced that it has no other reason for being than to make his charms glitter, if it regards itself as a property of the Other, a phosphorescence that *radiates* from that handsome body, the heat that *emanates* from it, the brilliance of its youth, the invisible sheath that shelters it, if it, with absolute oblivion of self, is only the considerable presence of beauty, then, in recompense, it will alienate itself within him, it will be his essence, his goal and his Ego. To belong to it unreservedly, and even unto death, is the cunningest and surest way of possessing it. Fascination, self-oblivion, dizziness, absolute submission in the service of a masterly act of inveigling: that is what defines more than one religious ecstasy, and love according to Genet.

Actually, this love is not addressed to the young hoodlum in his particularity. It is not at all concerned with the plans of the beloved and their success, that is, with his transcendence; it does not reflect him as a woman's love reflects the man she loves. It is addressed to a being who definitely has the appearance of a man and who is nevertheless an object, as is a woman, to a being who is utterly absorbed in criminal plans but whose undertakings, though not ceasing thereby to be efficacious, are essentially and primarily gestures, in short, to a *fake male,* to one of those supposed "double males" who "fuck men" because they themselves are women. Genet wants to be him whom he loves precisely insofar as the latter is already Genet. As soon as he meets a handsome hoodlum, the boy's beauty strikes and staggers him, knocks him down. But the angel who makes him bite the dust is himself. What loomed before him was objective Evil coming to him *in person.* Evil in the eyes, cowardice in the twist of the mouth, violence contained in the muscles, everything that he could *not discern sufficiently* in the image re-

flected to him by the mirror, all the pitiless guises of Evil, perceived pell-mell in an illumination—these are what it takes to subject him. For a moment he had the impression of seeing *himself,* with the same astonishment we feel when we unexpectedly meet a friend who we thought had left for Texas, that uncertainty which shifts to certainty, that bewilderment which contracts into recognition, that doubt which vanishes when one would like to continue doubting, that plenitude which entails our surrendering to reality because it is the highest tribunal. It is not so much the skin, the hardness of the muscles, the hair, the odor which stagger him and flood him with desire. It is, of course, all that, but all that as an embodiment of being, of *his* being. In that other who resembles him—or rather resembles what he would like to be—he at last sees himself as others see him. Hence, each of the men to whom Genet gives himself becomes the variable and imperfect representative of that identical Other whom Genet wants to be for himself. In loving that indifferent charmer with his body and soul, the abandoned child fulfills his impossible dream of being loved. For since he *is* the Other, it is he, he alone, who *is loved in the Other.* Genet, who is cleverer than Erik Seidler, has realized that in order to *be* the adorable Erik he has had *to make himself* the executioner, his worshiper. Through a thousand individual figures it is he himself that Genet is going to pursue, but himself as Other, himself untrammeled by his scruples, his cowardice, his wretchedness, his muscular weakness, a kind of titan of Evil, greater than his temporary incarnation and greater than Genet. Thus are born spontaneously the myth of the criminal, that is, the projection upon others of the qualities which the others have attributed to him, and the dichotomic conception of an outcast humanity which will be the major theme of his poetry: "the eternal couple of the criminal and the saint."

Later, we shall see these complementary themes little by little develop, enter into conflict and then unite. For the time being, we shall consider only the criminal, that is, the pure object of Genet's desire, or, if one prefers, the instrument of his new attempts to retrieve the Other. The phrase from *The Maids,* "the eternal couple of the criminal and the saint," makes the matter quite clear. This couple may seem ill-matched. If so, it is because Genet has deliberately upset the balance by linking a term of black ethics with a term of white ethics. "Criminal" conceals "hero." This hero who kills and gets killed gloriously, to the exalted admiration of a whole collectivity, becomes, after changing sign, the criminal of black

ethics who kills in order to get killed and whose death may become as legendary as that of a great captain. The term "saint" is retained as its correlative, firstly because "it is the most beautiful word in the French language," the pole which magnetized the daydreams of the child Genet, and secondly because saintliness is by nature antisocial. It is a direct relationship of the soul to God. In a word, Genet himself will decide about it. There is thus no need for him to challenge it, whereas heroism, which society consecrates, cannot appear under its "white" name in black ethics. But the description of the criminal which we shall be given will very often recall that of the warrior contained in the epic poems of military societies. As for the saint, a slight deflection will be enough for the word to appear suspect to us. Genet will say *"la sainte"** and this unexpected feminine form of the word should warn us that we have unwittingly entered the world upside-down. Hero, saint, in any case, we have understood: they are *examples,* models. Of the three ideals of ethics, Genet retains only two. The sage does not interest him at all. The reason is clear enough: it is wisdom which accepts the universe. And there is no reason for Genet to accept what is not offered him, what is denied him on principle. On the other hand, the root of heroism and saintliness is, in one way or another, challenge. No doubt the "white" hero defends a social order, but he defends it by destroying and by destroying himself. As for the saint, he challenges the human condition in its totality. Thus, the criminal is an archetype of the Ethics of Evil. And, in point of fact, the great murderers whose photos Genet pins on the walls of his prison cell play for him the role of intercessors. He prays, he meditates, while contemplating them. These sacred images facilitate his elevations. Nevertheless, he does not make use of them the way right-thinking people generally make use of their heroes. For the latter, as for Genet, there is identification. The bourgeois of 1789 actually wanted to *be* the heroes of Plutarch. But they proceeded by imitation. This means that they wanted to *act* like their great men in order to *become similar* to them. Genet does not dream of imitating. On the contrary, he is convinced that an imitation, even if one goes all the way, is a truthless aping. One must incorporate the heroic substance into oneself, and there are only two ways of doing so: cannibalism and the rites of possession. We shall later see a long, quiet dream of anthropophagy germinating within Genet. He is the praying mantis that eats her males. Throughout *Funeral*

* "The female saint."—Translator's note.

*Rites* he develops in magnificent images the desire to eat Jean Decarnin, his dead lover. But what we shall first examine is the resort to possession. Let us ask ourselves *by whom* Genet wants to be possessed and *how* this possession is going to operate.

By whom? The answer appears simple. By *the* criminal. There is a "participationist" belief underlying the whole operation. Genet has no illusions. He is quite aware that the hoodlums who subjugate him are never *the* criminal nor even criminals at all. But in order for him to accept servitude it suffices that they participate in some way in the ideal essence of crime. Thus, it is not so much to them that he gives himself as to the criminal of whom they are the momentary and imperfect embodiment, that is, to Genet himself as he is and as he ought to be. Part of his worship of those he loves consists of a systematic and continuous interpretation of signs. Without respite, his eyes register, manifest and glorify the touch of black heroism which is expressed in features and gestures.

But what exactly is *the* criminal?

In the first place, of course, a man who has committed a crime or who most certainly will commit one. Not that Genet has ever committed a murder or even, if we are to believe *Our Lady of the Flowers,* really dreamed of committing one, except, perhaps, some sadistic and passionate murder that would transform a handsome youngster into his pure earthly appearance so as to deliver him more fully to his lover. Indeed, I think that the fundamental conflict on the basis of which he shaped himself is not of the kind that finds its outlet in murder. One resorts to murder in order to cut the Gordian knot of an intolerable situation. But this situation must be felt as a direct relationship with one or more other persons. Genet, however, who is a victim of *all* others, is not oppressed or wronged by anyone in particular, and, in the last analysis, it is with himself that he has to deal. One kills when one thinks one is in the right or when one does not care a rap about rights and duties, but very rarely—although it can happen—when one knows one is in the wrong and in order to be more so. Although, in the latter case, one may want to get rid of *a* judge, like the honorable Spaniard who strangled a taxi driver so as not to have to admit to him that he was unable to pay the fare. But who would dream of annihilating a hundred thousand judges? What makes Genet's case singular is that he has to deal with himself or with everybody, never with a few, or, if one prefers, that his relations with individuals are never anything but a symbolic specification of those he maintains with all of society. Finally, if he wants to survive, he will have to bring

his enemies to their knees. But as they are legion and he is alone, he will have to invent some brilliant action that has a universal bearing. For the time being, this hounded adolescent, this inmate of a reformatory, this little Barcelona beggar, has not yet thought about the matter. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the mythical Other must reflect to him the image of the greatest objective Evil and that this evil is crime. There is, as we shall see, a greater Evil, namely betrayal. But Genet reserves this one for himself. It is a subjective evil, without pomp, without display, a constant exercise of the mental restriction which necessitates consciousness in Evil. Crime is the greatest Object-Evil. It is showy: blood, cries, death, night endow it with tragic pomp. And this is essential, since it is the Act of the Other and since it is committed so that it can be contemplated from without. In its essence, it is the suppression of Good by Evil, of Being by Nonbeing, of the Absolute by the Relative, and it is at the same time the swallowing up of the Relative, of the Reflection and of Evil, which are drawn into the shipwreck into which they have caused Good to be engulfed. For a moment, pure Appearance exists in the absolute, since the consciousness of the respectable man is abolished. For a moment, Appearance assumes the functions of the Being which no longer is, and then it itself is annihilated in turn. It is this ephemeral and complete being of Nonbeing—Querelle, pure object—that gives its value to the criminal act. The murder is the instant. Moreover, of the common-law offenses condemned by society, murder is the one with which it deals most severely. It is therefore murder which most surely establishes its author as the evildoer in men's eyes. Now, as we already know, Genet must always return to this tribunal. However, it is not sufficient to commit a crime in order *to be* a criminal. For this solipsist, murder is defined by its origin even more than by its results. The suffering of the victim, his frightful anguish at the sight of the arm raised to strike him, the grief of his family and friends, all this matters little to Genet. He doesn't think about it. I cannot repeat often enough that Genet is far too unconcerned with the consciousness of others to be sadistic. It is not the death which is *felt* that he appreciates in murder; it is the *objective* death and the objective act which causes it. Although these interest him only insofar as they confer *criminal being* upon the murderer. Lefranc, who kills in order to be admitted to the feudal brotherhood of murderers, derives no benefit from his forced, imitated crime, a crime which was not implied by his nature. The death of Maurice does not reflect glory upon him, does not metamorphose

him; it remains separate, authorless, an accident, an error. In *The Maids,* Genet is even more categorical: in vain do Solange and Claire dream of, premeditate, cunningly prepare and finally attempt the murder of Madame; they fail because they were bound to fail. Through all these fables, Genet is admonishing himself: "There's no point in dreaming of committing a crime. You won't carry it off. And even if, by chance, you finally did kill, you wouldn't be a criminal. That's not the way to *absorb* murder." For crime is an election; it requires the help of grace. Phineus, Andromeda's fiancé, apologizes, in Corneille's play, for not having fought to deliver her from the monster. He wasn't sure of the place, Perseus had the luck to happen to be there. He is severely answered that this kind of luck is called grace and that it is by such good fortune that one recognizes merit and predestination. Genet might, like this unfortunate lover, be told by one of his criminals:

> Heaven, which knows better than we what we are,
> Measures its favors by men's merit.
> And you would have had the benefit of such aid
> Had it been able to find in you the virtues it found in him.
> These are graces from on high, rare and singular,
> Which do not descend for vulgar souls.

Thus, by a vicious circle characteristic of all ethics of being, one kills in order to *be* a criminal, but it would be vain merely to try to become a criminal if one *were* not a criminal in advance. "You would not seek me if you had not found me."

This simplifies matters for Genet: since being comes to the murderer by grace from on high, the actual murder is no longer necessary. What he will love in hoodlums is the visible sign of election. And he surrounds himself, in his prison cells, with pictures of great and famous murderers, but does not disdain to pin on the wall photos of unknowns which he has culled here and there when the anonymous faces, which may be those of athletes or merchants, seem to him to bear the mark of crime. And insofar as we can know about his sexual adventures from his books, he seems to have dreamed a great deal of giving himself to criminals like Weidmann, Pilorge and Harcamone, but to have yielded particularly to the Darlings and Stilitanos, that is, to fake toughs whose muscles and gait gave him, for a moment, the illusion that they would one day kill or that they could kill in certain favorable circumstances. For in this inverted world which takes Being as a goal and doing as a means, it is all the better if one can economize on the means. In short, the beloved must manifest by indubitable signs that he belongs to a military

aristocracy. After that, it matters little whether or not he has an opportunity to demonstrate his worth. One trusts him.

There is something that counts far more: it is not enough that the beloved be a beautiful appearance; he must *be only that.* If Genet is to be able to identify himself with the one he loves, if his consciousness, though remaining inessential, is to be the indispensable brilliance which draws that great and terrible figure from the shadow, it is not permissible for another consciousness to assume the same task. He does not fear the consciousness of the just, of decent people. Their consciousness, which is outraged and full of hatred, serves only to stress the urgency of his mission, which is to surround the most decried of men with religious respect. The screams of the mob confirm him in the feeling of his perfect solitude. He is alone in loving the one whom all others detest. His very love is a crime. To love murder in defiance of all is his way of committing it. As for the other queers, who perhaps dream of stealing his man from him, he is not afraid of them either. He will fight them, and the stronger will prevail. The only consciousness that would reduce his amorous endeavor to nothingness would be the consciousness of the criminal himself. If the latter could make contact with himself and love himself, what need would he have for Genet to love him? If the unity of being and knowing were achieved within a pure diamond, Genet would be only the superfluous ray that glided over that phosphorescence without being able to add light to it. A consciousness that knew its appearance would be self-sufficient. In order for Genet to be an absolute consciousness of this appearance, it must remain, without him, in the shadow, all by itself. Thus, his mission as *revealer* leads him to deny passionately the consciousness of the beloved: "When the train, while going at top speed, lets me see a youngster amidst wet leaves, dead branches, fog . . . I envy his beauty, his ragamuffin grace and his luck to serve a happy minute. I console myself with the thought that he cannot enjoy this instant of whose charm he is unaware."

Can he quite deny the consciousness of Harcamone and of Our Lady? That would be a lack of verisimilitude. But he can convince himself that it is only a dead light or a bit of turbid water in the hollow of a rock, tepid, vain, superfluous. In real life this means that a certain air of glum stupidity and conceit sets him all aflutter: that head is unoccupied, he is going to be able to install himself in it, like a hermit crab in an empty shell:

"Our Lady thought about nothing, and that is what gave him the air of knowing everything straight off."

"Those handsome, vacant-eyed heads. . . . Men with such faces

terrify me when I have to cross their paths warily, but what a dazzling surprise when, in their landscape, at the turn of a deserted lane, I approach, with my heart racing like mad, and discover nothing, nothing but looming emptiness, sensitive and proud like a tall foxglove."

"Armand . . . subjected me to his pleasure. . . . Crushed by that mass of flesh, which was devoid of the slightest spirituality, I experienced the giddiness of finally meeting the perfect brute."

Thus, the Other is, once again, totally Other, Other than self. He escapes. We are back at the play of reflections which we described at the beginning of the present work. The right-thinking man had freed himself from his negative powers by projecting them upon Genet, whom he charged with embodying them. Genet gets rid of them in turn and projects this absolute otherness upon the beloved. Foreign to himself, he can love only Another-than-self, for it is himself in his absolute otherness that he loves in the guise of the other.

This exigency contains another exigency, one which is perhaps less essential but more immediate and which creeps into his very perception. Since he cannot be quite one with the beloved, nor quite two, the latter's body must not be offered to him, by movements, gestures and words, as quite his own body or quite that of another. He does not learn the movements of his own body, he does not witness them. To will them, execute them and feel them are one and the same. This transparent intimacy kills desire. But if the other's gestures are unpredictable to him or if, after a period of apprenticeship, he predicts them with a certain margin of uncertainty, a certain percentage of error, if he has to observe them in order to know them, if he has to interpret them patiently, if he is likely at any moment to be surprised or upset by some unexpected reaction, then the beloved will be only one among others and Genet will lose all hope of identifying himself with him. This behavior must not be completely transparent lest it lose its magic, though it must not be completely opaque either. It must be other and yet his, must come to him from the depths of the Other, more rebellious than a simple reflection, and yet must, each time, fulfill a desire, an anticipation, an expectation, so that he no longer knows whether he is learning of his desire through the Other's gestures, whether it is his desire that has provoked these gestures or whether an ineluctable necessity has at the same time produced desire in him and, in the other, the movements which satisfy it. We are all familiar with the illusion of false recognition: on certain days when we are

tired we have the feeling that we have already seen the objects which are about us, have already witnessed the events which are taking place, so that the new, without losing its novelty, seems to us a restoration of the old and we are unable to decide whether each incident is confirming an earlier anticipation or is provoking, subsequently, the feeling of having anticipated. Such is the impression Genet must constantly have in the presence of the beautiful spectacle offered him by the beloved. In each of the other's movements, in each word, Genet must perceive both the necessity of his own nature which does not cease to be the worst and the strangeness which will enable him to enjoy it. Amorous bliss will spring from a gesture which is so *evident* and yet so *new* that it becomes as perfect as a poem. This obviously implies that the beloved's consciousness has little to do with his acts, and yet it need hardly be said that he must not be a pure mechanism. Genet can love in the other only his own freedom in reverse. But the reverse of freedom is called Destiny. All the preceding exigencies lead to this crossroad. If a murder which is due to chance or is an act of defiance is not sufficient to confer the title of criminal, it is because Destiny alone is qualified to call for a crime. And it is one and the same to call the criminal a member of the elect, an aristocrat or a man of Destiny.

Genet, Lefranc, the girl queens and Solange the maid fail to go through with their murders because their nimble, loquacious minds envisage too many possibilities. And when they finally do decide on one, it never quite belongs to them since there exist an infinite number of others which are likewise their possibilities. We may find this surprising: the influence of the world of labor and of conditions of production leads us increasingly to consider things from the point of view of praxis. From this point of view we say that a possibility is ours when we have chosen it and when we have at least begun to implement it. But with regard to the ethics of being, which, whether white or black, emanate from the parasitic classes, *my* possibility lies in my nature a priori, and it is not even necessary that I think at once of conforming to it. I will even be allowed to try to escape from it, for I have not chosen it. The possibility has elected me, and it will always find me. It should not be thought that Destiny assumes only the form of the Ananke that weighs upon Oedipus and Laius. The adventure of this father, who is assured of being killed by his son and who decides to do away with him and thus takes the path which will lead him most surely to death, is certainly a fine example of Fatality. But every conscious member of the aristocratic classes is a Laius and an Oedipus. There

are any number of novels and stories in which young sons of distinguished family do the most outlandish things or throw themselves into reckless undertakings in an effort to elude the sole possibility which is *their* possibility, only to find themselves ultimately led back, by unexpected ways, to their starting point, that is, to the Destiny which has been awaiting them. We have recently been told of how the sons of Bordeaux wine merchants attempted to escape their destiny as wine merchants through debauchery and literature. All in vain. These businessmen are the object of a special grace. The son will sell wine as did his father, and, like him, will pay his harvesters less than the union wage. The same holds for the criminal: he is a man with a single possibility, what the Americans call a "one-track mind." In each circumstance of his life, there exists for him only one possible line of action, the one that will lead him most surely to crime or that will most perfectly express his criminal nature. He will stick to this line, even if his intelligence makes him aware that there is another, even if he *believes* he is following another. Our Lady of the Flowers, who is tired of always relating his crime in the same terms, attempts, on the day of the trial, to give a different account of it. In vain. The same words group themselves in the same order to shape the same sentences: "For to Our Lady, a gesture is a poem and can be expressed only with the help of a symbol which is always, always the same." What the murderer wants to think, or believes he thinks, about the murder is unimportant. What counts is the way in which the crime is thought within him. "We do not think," said the poet Francis Ponge, "we are thought." For Genet, who is also a poet, murder and poetry are of the same nature because the poet and the criminal are thought when they believe that they are thinking. Crime is thought-as-Other.

It is also an act. The act of the Other. That is precisely what Genet makes one of his murderers say: "We are acted upon." He thus transfers to the beloved his old anxieties of the time when his powerless consciousness was in rebellion against his nature. The "chosen one" rebels in vain against the crime which is awaiting him; he attempts in vain to elude his destiny. He will go the limit. What happens on the day of the murder? Simply this: the Other who he was potentially becomes Another actually. "The murderer forces my respect . . . [he is] at the bottom of a pit into which, with his feet together, he has—curious prospector—hurled himself with a ludicrously bold leap." He lets himself fall into his image, like Narcissus. Green Eyes, too, speaks of his crime in similar terms: he

says that he has *fallen*. And, after the murder, he "was scared . . . of finding himself in someone else's boots." He explains: "I wanted to back up. Stop! No go! I tried hard. I ran in all directions. . . . I wanted to turn back the clock, to undo what I'd done, to live my life over until before the crime. It looks easy to go backward—but my body couldn't do it." All that is left for him is to will his coinciding with his destiny: "Things happened by themselves. I simply made the gestures that led me as quietly as can be to the guillotine."

"Falling," "fall," these words indicate that at certain moments the earth opens beneath our feet. The entire universe becomes an occasion, suddenly becomes dizzying, because the circumstances have, all by themselves, begun to act in concert with the sole possibility of the future murderer. The perception itself has changed: "Moments like that are awful. They're awful because they're sweet . . . they're too sweet . . . it's by its sweetness that you recognize catastrophe." It's sweet because one glides sweetly, gently, things mime the act to be performed, they outline it. Our Lady is asked "who gave him the idea of this method of committing murder." He replies that it was the murdered man himself. "Monsieur Ragon was wearing a tie that was too tight. He was all red. So he took it off . . . so I thought that if I tightened it, it'd be worse . . . because I got good arms." In short, the act is there, ready-made, suggested by the tie which chokes, by the gesture the old man makes to loosen it, by the purpleness of his cheeks. It is the world that offers the act, exactly as the steep line of the cliffs offers me, if I lean forward, my fall and death. The strange sexual impression felt by Genet in the presence of these handsome, obstinate males is prophetic, for it interprets the sign which they bear on their forehead, discloses upon them the dark radiance of the future crime and their will to bring down upon themselves the destiny of which they are perhaps unaware, which they still refuse. While the young hoodlum, who is as noble and stupid as a bull, feels his way, becomes confused, loses his bearings, Genet's consciousness, the only vigilant element in this forsaken carcass, sees from afar the dawning catastrophe. Every gesture of his idol surprises, enriches and satisfies him to the full. Not that he quite foresaw it. He knew only that this gesture, whatever it might be, would perfectly express this criminal nature and would bring its author closer to crime. He knew it and willed it. And when the act looms up, it always surpasses his hopes. It is more beautiful than any he could have invented, and at the same time it is obviously what was to be expected. No other was possible. No sooner does it begin than it entails the

certainty that it has always been expected to be exactly what it is. And its lightning-like consequences pierce the future with their flashes. The murderer is going to fall: his fall is contained in his empty eyes, in his ill-omened face. He is already dizzy but does not realize it. Genet feels this dizziness in the Other's place. His legs sag, he falls to his knees, but *with the Other's fall.* Minute by minute he lives this fall, which the murderer does not yet experience, for it is a rehearsal, on a larger stage, of his own fall. For him, too, a day came when everything was too easy; he too, "curious prospector," hurled himself to the bottom of a pit. The criminal, carrying Evil to the point of murder and catastrophe to the point of his own death, transforms Genet's original adventure into a sacred mystery. Thus, by a kind of osmosis, the murderer reproduces Genet's fall and Genet becomes a consciousness of the murderer's fall. Clutching each other, the two men sink to the bottom of the well. This, then, is the key to the impression of *déjà vu* which governs Genet's love. It is not enough to say that he foresees the other's gestures, that he awaits them, that he wills them; he *recognizes* them. And he himself does not know whether he is prostrating himself before the pompous and sinister future of the beloved, like the Starets before the future sufferings of Dmitri Karamazov, or before his own past.

And, of course, the act must not be gratuitous, for the murderer is not the demoniacal Prince of Evil; he is its tragic hero. Therefore, the murder must be rigorously determined by external circumstances and empirical motives: hunger, poverty, fury. When Our Lady is questioned about the motives of his crime, Genet is careful not to let him reply "I was forced by Fate" or "It's because I'm a murderer." Quite the contrary, he gives the simplest, most trivial answer: "Because I was fabulously broke." And this answer is true. In fact, Genet establishes a hierarchy of crime according to the degree of necessity of the motives. At the bottom, there is the gratuitous crime, that of Lefranc. But Green Eyes himself admits: "Maybe I'm not as strong as Snowball because his crime was a little more necessary than mine. Because he killed in order to rob and loot, but, like him, I killed in order to live, and now I'm smiling." However, we have understood that, for the born criminal, need, gain, fear and anger are only seeming motives. Or rather they are those which he knows, those which he gives to himself. But for Genet, who contemplates him, they are the ways whereby Providence manifests his election. Thus, for Bossuet, God utilizes the greed of kings or of their ministers, the vainglory of a

captain or the cowardice of his soldiers in order to attain his ends. And the cowardice, greed and vainglory are true, as is the fact that Our Lady was fabulously broke. But, after all, there have been other cowards whose downfall has not destroyed an empire; others have been equally broke without committing murder. It is the Other who dictates to Our Lady the poetic and ridiculous word "fabulous," which rises from the depths with the purpose of suggesting that this impecuniousness was not quite natural, that it resembled grace. The lover knows the beloved better than the beloved knows himself. Where the criminal sees only a consequence of hunger, of cold, of hatred, Genet immediately discerns the hand of destiny. He himself discloses the mechanism of his faking in the following passage from one of his poems: "I must make the situation as obscure as possible (and strained to the breaking-point) so that the drama is inevitable and can be ascribed to fatality."

Although the vertiginous attraction of Evil is primary, the inversion of time appears as patently as in the *Discourse on Universal History:* it is the future which prepares the present. Since being is subordinated to doing, since one kills in order to be a criminal and because one already is, the criminal that I shall be, that I have been since the beginning of time, stirs up within me a murder which chooses its own pretexts. Henceforth the act becomes aesthetic: it is a finality without an end. The murderer kills in order to manifest the crime which is already more than half inside things but which appears only to his murderer's eyes: "And for me everything became simpler. The girl was already under me. All I had to do was put one hand delicately on her mouth and the other delicately on her neck." In like manner, the artist paints his canvas in order to disengage and bring into focus a meaning in the landscape which is visible only to him. The criminal dances his crime as the ballerina dances the dagger step. The author of the ballet conceived his work for this dance precisely because the ballerina excelled in it. This fact determines the plot: the daughter of a Cossack has been seduced and avenges herself by murdering her seducer. For the spectator, she killed because she had been raped. The truth is that she was raped because she had to kill. The murderer, like Erik, is "a being who can exist only in accordance with a beautiful gesture": he is hungry because he must stab. The murder becomes an *aesthetic gesture.* The objection may be raised, however, that he took money. Hence, his act had a practical result, an end. Yes, but the money is of little use to him; he is inevitably arrested and sentenced. Yet he has at least killed his victim. But Genet doesn't

give a damn about the victim. Who is Monsieur Ragon? And Vic, who is he? Who is the Armenian whom Querelle killed? Who is the child who was murdered by Divine, the one shot by Erik? Who is the woman who was killed by Gorgui? And the one Green Eyes strangled? The victim is a pure pretext for a gesture whose beauty suffices unto itself. "But *I'm* a fine phrase," says Green Eyes. Let there be no misunderstanding: Genet is very far from regarding "murder as one of the fine arts." The criminal does *not make* beauty —he *is* himself raw beauty. By virtue of each of his acts he changes into what he is, and indeed one of the chief aspects of the beautiful is the perfect appropriateness of act to essence, the subordination of becoming to being; Destiny is thus perceptible and temporality is subdued to expressing only the eternal.

"The Eternal passed by in the form of a pimp," says Genet. And what actually is this pimp who is so constantly invariable, so foreseeable, so fatal, whose every swagger, every word, whose gesture in rolling a cigarette or slipping his hands into his pockets seems less the effect of a particular act of will than the perfect and necessary fulfillment of his essence? What is he if not the idea accessible to the senses, the reflection of eternity in the moving world of becoming? Genet lives in deep sympathy with all these movements because they all manifest, though to different degrees, the same crime. Stilitano constantly rolls a white blob of spit from one corner of his open mouth to the other, and Genet is in raptures because this nasty little habit, by virtue of its ceremonious repetition, of the insolence, abandon and narcissism which it manifests, of the blithe perfection with which it is executed, reveals Stilitano in his entirety each and every instant. We now recognize this impression of having willed what the other does while one is learning it, and of foreseeing what one does not know as if one were recalling it. As Bergson has shown in a famous analysis, it is the effect of *grace*. Destiny is, in both meanings of the term, the grace of criminals.

Grace, beauty: expressions which are disconcerting here because we usually give them a content which is voluptuously sensual. One says "grace" and we see a pretty girl, more rarely a very young man. But Genet has a severe conception of beauty. He cares little about the substance of the beautiful; only its form matters. "Beauty," he says, "is the perfection of organization." But the purpose of organization may be to terrify. The beauty of the criminal is the perfect organization of Evil, its plenitude, its perfect visibility, its purity, its power, its staggering evidence. Beauty can be perfection *in ugliness*. Does not Genet say that ugliness is beauty at rest

and, about one of his friends who is pale with cowardice, that his face was radiant with beauty? "Armand's face was false, cunning, mean, sneaky, brutal. No doubt it is easy for me to discover these things after knowing the man, but I know that the impression I had at the time could have been the result only of the miraculous union of these qualities on a single face. . . . He exhibited no regular beauty, but the presence on his face of what I have mentioned—and which was pure because so unmarred by its opposite—gave him a somber though sparkling appearance. His physical strength was prodigious." The reader may regard this as a kind of taste for paradox or merely for systematizing. To do so would be to simplify: Genet *really* has an impression of beauty in the presence of this brute. The proof is that he immediately submits to Armand's pleasure: he has come to the Beautiful through Evil.

If one carries matters to their ultimate conclusion—and Genet always does—the fact is that the criminal is already dead. This big, grim, mindless piece of window dressing is a dead man; Genet submits to a dead man. We have already seen the child Genet die. And since, as a result of the vanishing of consciousness, death shifts the existent to being and, in particular, to being for others, we already knew that the will to become the Other, to become absolute appearance, entails death for all the embodiments of Evil. Genet says admirably of the Carolinas, who are Barcelona fairies:

"Covered with ridicule, the Carolinas were sheltered. . . . They were all dead. What we saw walking in the street were shades cut off from the world. Fairies are a pale and motley race that flower in the minds of decent folk."

But there are various ways of dying. The loftiest is probably that of the criminal, because he hurls himself with all his freedom—that strange freedom which merges with fatality—against the rock of his destiny. "To state only that the criminal thinks, while committing his crime, that he will never be caught is false. No doubt he refuses to distinguish precisely the frightful sequel which his act has for himself. Nevertheless, he knows that this act condemns him to death. We shall call Querelle a joyous moral suicide." And further on: "When the crime had been committed, Querelle felt upon his shoulder the hand of an ideal detective, and he continued walking with heavy steps from the edge of the corpse to that isolated spot, crushed by the astonishing destiny which will be his."

The reason is that, in this world of appearance, to be a murderer is not only to kill, nor even to kill because that is one's destiny, but also to be recognized and consecrated, hence pursued, hounded, ar-

rested, imprisoned, condemned, executed ingloriously. To will to be a thief is to will that others have an advantage over me, to will that each of my acts be henceforth only the seamy side of theirs. After the commission of a crime (in this case, a theft, but it would be even truer of a murder) : "A new universe instantaneously presented itself to Darling: the universe of the irremediable. It is the same as the one we were in, with one peculiar difference: instead of acting and knowing we are acting, we know we are acted upon."

Obliging wills substitute for his: instead of his going toward objects, instead of his putting out his hand to seize them, they fly into his hand; things have lost their "coefficient of adversity." As if he were a prince, others will mount his stairs and will help him to descend them, a car will wait for him outside, doors will open by themselves, hands will give him his food, judges will inconvenience themselves for him, desiring only to hear him tell about his life, and, as a finishing touch, in the early hours of the morning a throne will be set up for him. He knows that this frightful kindness is pushing him toward death. Let him consent to die, let him demand his fate with pride. All wills will harmonize with his, he will become the center of the world. As soon as Green Eyes assumed his crime, "everything became easy. He simply made the gestures that led him as quietly as can be to the guillotine." The unity of minds, which the Good and the True have such difficulty in achieving, will be produced easily but in reverse, with resentment and hatred. And for that very reason the criminal's death is his revenge and his apotheosis.

Let us imagine this corpse which has already been turned over to others, which is swarming with insects: its act, committed in silence and darkness, has suddenly placed it before us, naked, in a glaring light. An object of contempt and hatred because it caused a death, it is also the object of universal respect because death inhabits it. It will know the joy of making right-thinking people revere Evil in its person. In a certain sense, the criminal is still being duped, for if the members of the social body bare their heads, it is not for him, but for the decease which society has in store for him. But he does not think of this, and, moreover, what he thinks hardly matters: it is Genet who matters, Genet, lost in the crowd, who sees him going by and who is enjoying the religious horror he inspires. This great pompous and tragic appearance will have the destiny it deserves. It is escorted to the throne in a chariot; it mounts the steps of the throne, towers above and contemplates a sea of upturned faces. Finally, it confronts them all and rises above them all. In the muttering of the frightened voices it hears a hymn to its solitude

and silence. The child Genet is avenged by another. The abjection into which he had been cast by the condemnation of all men is assumed by another and changed into glory. In a moment he will be quite dead, with his head on one side and his body on the other. Genet's revenge will then be complete, for these pure appearances have a strange power beyond their life. As long as they are alive, the decent man rids himself of his negativity by discharging it upon them, then forgets them. The police serves as *censor:* "The police is to society what the dream is to daily life. That which society forbids itself it authorizes the police to evoke as soon as it wants it." The police filters the decent man's consciousness and protects it from the dark phantoms which, in the last analysis, are only the objective manifestations of his propensity for doing wrong. And besides, whether dead or alive, the small fry—fairies and thieves—"will never be entitled to broad daylight." But if one of the powers of darkness should commit an exemplary crime, his act overrides the censor, charges forward, and the right-thinking man cannot help but see it. If one thinks that one is getting rid of the criminal by executing him, the world of darkness triumphs, for the guillotine becomes legendary. Landru, Jack the Ripper and Weidmann have long since ceased to exist, *except in good consciences.* The latter are obliged to maintain them in being by a will contrary to good will. The police are powerless. What can cops do against a memory? So the decent man's loathing of the culprit becomes the decent man's self-loathing. He blamed the criminal for existing, he blames himself for evoking him. He is fascinated for a moment by that image which now derives its being only from him, and he suddenly realizes that it is his reflection. By virtue of his death the criminal gives back to the just what the just have given him. For want of a scapegoat, Evil reinstates the good consciences and poisons them in turn. Immortality itself is inverted. It is the great, stately shades of benefactors of mankind which seem lifeless appearances, since the decent man evokes them with pleasure and is very conscious of drawing them up from nothingness when it suits him to do so. On the other hand, the unholy shades, which he fears, seem to him to evoke themselves independently and against his will: Soleilland has more mana than St. Vincent de Paul. What Genet desires in a roughneck whom he happens to encounter is not only his fall, but his glory as well. If he later dreamed of literary glory, it was as a substitute for the criminal glory he was unable to acquire, somewhat as a symbolic sacrifice has, in certain religions, been substituted for human sacrifice.

For the time being, the criminal, standing on the scaffold with

his hands tied, is not yet defunct; he has a moment left, a moment of that life which so relentlessly willed death, as Pierrot willed the presence in his mouth of the worm that froze him with horror. Faithful to himself, he strains his evil will to the breaking point in willing, as ultimate conclusion, his own Evil. He is pushed, he swings: at the instant when his life is exalted to its highest pitch, he is metamorphosed for others into the absolute Other who no longer exists except in terms of others. There is no doubt that Genet projects into this myth of the fatal instant that other instant which separated him from his childhood as the blade of the guillotine separates the head from the trunk. The crime, that vertiginous fall which transforms the innocent man into a guilty one, and the public execution, which changes life into death, are only the double repetition of this crisis. The criminal's entire life is summed up in two instants. And these two instants are ultimately one and the same, for the first opens up to allow a glimpse of the second. And both are only the objective representation of a third, that which Genet actually lived himself when the dizzying word rang in his ears. In this sense, the dual personality of Erik and his reflection, the dichotomy of the lover and the beloved, merely reproduce in space the myth of beheading. Erik crushing himself against the mirror and wanting to enter entirely into his reflection is the still living criminal pressing himself completely against his death and trying to go over alive to the other side of life. And just as, at the "fatal instant," the criminal contemplates himself as an absolute Other, that is, as a future dead man, so the lover, who alone is alive, devotes his life to contemplating, in the beloved, his own death.

The role of the beloved is to fulfill publicly, in heroic fashion, the destiny of Genet, even unto dying. His function is to give it the mystical and supernatural dimensions of a religious sacrifice and to confer upon it, in the eyes of Genet himself, the aspect of a Mystery. At the supreme instant, the greatest Evil and the greatest Good loom up together, separated by the infinitely thin gleam of the blade:

> . . . his apotheosis
> Will be the bright scaffold
> Lovely effect from which roses spring.

The reader will, I imagine, realize the advantages of the role Genet has chosen for himself: God immolating himself despite himself. It is for the salvation of the lover that the beloved dies.

But, after all, this Passion is only in prospect. As a matter of fact,

it is dreamt. The males to whom Genet gives himself have never committed a murder, and actually they never will. But since the murderer is only an appearance, all that Genet asks of them is to have the stamp of the murderer. He won't be difficult: all he will require is that they be counterfeit murderers, just formidable enough for him to be able to dream up a magnificent destiny for them. Let them look mean and cruel; that will be in lieu of beauty. Let them be foolish, pigheaded, grim; that is enough for him to regard them as men "with a single possibility." Let their anger, their nervousness, their cowardice always get them into trouble; they will thus always have at least the trappings of fatality. Above all, let them be haughty; let their fierce pride make them burn with a desire to be terrible, that is, to be dreaded by others and to be unpredictable to themselves; let them dream only of appearing, of displaying themselves, of acting tough. They will then spontaneously establish themselves as pure appearances. Genet will do the rest and will convince himself that they are dead men. He will wrap the poor image that they want to give of themselves in the shroud of his love. Stupid and vile, often cowardly, conceited, blundering: there you have the picture of the males to whom Genet is going to submit. He will require of them only one virtue: indifference.

Indeed, in these living corpses life can be only a phantom life. They look, they talk, they command, but for Genet who contemplates them their looks, words and commands are only evil spells that escape from bewitched carcasses. Sacred because he is dead, the criminal is magical because he is alive. Magical indeed is the inanimate thing that produces human effects without ceasing to be a thing, and this is precisely what is done by that big male carcass which is haunted by a semblance of consciousness. Whatever human features it has are only a mirage that shimmers at the surface of matter. Thus, its beauty becomes a magical power which is nothing other than consciousness in reverse. The handsome, impenetrable Pimp has the powers of the negative. He can touch, push, enter, pound if he wants to, but one cannot touch him in return. He is a taboo object, like primitive kings who cast a blight on those who jostle them inadvertently. Beauty keeps one at a distance: "At times I would bring my hand very close to the edges without ever venturing to touch him, for I feared that he might dissolve, might drop dead or that I might die." A good definition of the satanic mirage. The pistoles in the Devil's purse change into dead leaves if one lays one's hand on it. Impelled by its inner logic, the notion of appearance spontaneously runs its course. Genet loves only appear-

ance, submits only to appearance, which is simultaneously Evil, the Other and Beauty. But absolute appearance, like the big lakes of the Sahara, vanishes when one approaches it. If Genet stands too close to the handsome pimp whom he adores, the very appearance of the criminal will be dissipated. The handsome, spellbound corpse will become a live little brute. And it is Genet himself who begs beauty to keep away: "My hair shuddered, but at that instant the following prayer welled up in me: 'Do not let me touch you. Never address me.' " And he concludes: "Thus, I kept him at a distance." I cannot help but see a certain caution in this conjuration. Genet wants to keep his myth; he does not want to look at it too closely. But there is something else: he does not want to *take*. In order to achieve his ends, there is no need for him to feel a body, to possess it. If he wants to capture the appearance, he can make it descend into him only by a magical operation of submission. It is the appearance *as appearance* that he cherishes, with its borrowed and evanescent being. Not that he necessarily *resigns* himself to the mirage: he *loves* it as the thin film which separates being from nothingness. And one can maintain without fear of paradox that this beautiful image belongs to him more truly when it denies itself than when it gives itself. It is there, within reach, but if he takes another step, it is dissipated. Thus, it still depends on him since he forbids himself to take this step. It is born of his refusal to enjoy it, of the tension which mingles abstention with desire. If he bows to it and worships it, it grows stronger, it becomes hallucinatory. He believes in it without ceasing to know, in a corner of his mind, that he himself is the author of his belief. He says somewhere that "love is despair." It would be more correct to say that it is, in him, the proud will to solitude and despair in the presence of the other, for his pride is safe within the servitude: he submits to an absence.

We can understand why he regards indifference as the cardinal virtue of the beloved. But the object of worship must not think of reciprocating; he would lose his prestige, would cease at once to be the Other and become a lover, a burden. To serve him is perfect; but Genet refuses to be of service to him. If the beloved proved to be a consciousness, if he sought in Genet his other self, Genet would lose his solitude, would cease to be the purely relative, the inessential which he has striven to become, at the very moment when the beloved, descending from heaven to earth, lost his baleful and sublime virtue as a transfigured corpse. Once, however, during his adolescence, Genet desired a certain youngster. "You don't mean it," replied the other in surprise. "We're the same age." When

Genet realized what he had been doing, he approved the reply with all his heart. The episode is revealing: since the particularity which he has made of himself is the result of the fact that the others refuse to maintain reciprocal relations with him, Genet, who is nothing other than the demand for the particular, would think he was destroying himself if he accepted reciprocal love. Such a statement as Divine's saying to Gabriel "You're myself" might be misleading. And, in fact, Gabriel smiles with pride: he is thrilled, the idiot. But the words mean: I am your truth and you are not mine. We shall come back to this.

The indifference of the handsome males is not even cruelty, nor is it hardness of heart or coldness of temperament or any other inner, contingent trait of character. It is their very essence, their profound nature as things, as objects. For Genet, the couple is conceived as the union of the soul and the body, but inverted. It is composed of a consciousness and of a body, but the consciousness has turned to the body and made of it its sole object. Their relations cannot therefore be reciprocal, since the consciousness is a consciousness of the body and the body is quite simply a body. Or, if one prefers, the former is in itself and for itself a relationship, and the latter is an autonomous substance. It is this externality, this autonomy of the substance, that Genet calls indifference. "The queens . . . fancied they were enlacing this handsome man. . . . Indifferent and bright as a slaughterhouse knife, he passed by, cleaving them all in two slices which came together again noiselessly, though emitting a slight scent of hopelessness which no one betrayed." The words designating the loved ones are all disguised negations: "motionless and silent," "inflexible," "impenetrable," "the angel of death and death itself, as unyielding as a rock," "You did not move, you were not sleeping, you were not dreaming, you were in flight, motionless and pale, frozen, straight, stretched out stiff." This tough is absent. His purest virtues are destructive forces or deficiencies. He is first and foremost the *non:* nonlife, nonlove, nonpresence, nongood.

No doubt it is essential that the pimps have muscles. In the presence of a powerful build, Genet swoons and melts with love, excited by the simple display of virile strength, but these muscles serve no purpose. Too aristocratic to work, the beloved are too lazy to want to achieve the kind of athletic distinction of which the lover might be proud; and too serious as well, too absorbed in their austere and egotistical dances; and as for fighting, they are too cowardly. In fact, if we are to believe Genet's accounts, the stronger

they are the more cowardly they are. Darling is a coward, Green Eyes is a coward, Bulkaen, Paulo and Stilitano are cowards. Far from reproaching them with this cowardice, Genet delights in it. If he is threatened, it does not even occur to him to take refuge under their wing. Those powerful arms are not meant for protecting him. Quite the contrary, Darling and Green Eyes snicker when the girl queens tear each other to pieces for love of them. The Germans rape Riton in front of Erik's eyes without the latter's making a move to defend him. No, the muscles are for display. They impart a quiet and terrible power to movements, they are the signs of transcendence. But only the signs, for the pimp never does anything. They are the epaulettes and gold braid which manifest his right to command. Above all, their compact solidity is the symbol of the criminal's absolute density, his impenetrability: muscles and frame represent the being of this appearance, the opacity of the in-itself. Impenetrable and tough, bulky, tense, rocky, the pimp will be defined by his rigidity. His body, drawn upward by the muscles, seems a penis taut with the desire to pierce, to bore, to split, rising toward the sky "with the cruel and sudden sharpness of a steeple puncturing a cloud of ink." *Rigidity,* word dear to Genet, both moral and sexual, designating the tension of his soul, his hatred of all abandon, and the fatal force that drives the criminal to his destruction. Rigidity: Destiny is a giant penis, the man is utterly a sex organ and the organ becomes a man. "The big, inflexible, strict pimps, their cocks in full bloom—I no longer know whether they are lilies or whether lilies and cocks are not totally they." Genet's pansexualism is going to find this muscular and sexual stiffness everywhere. The child Querelle, at the foot of one of the two massive towers that defend the port of La Rochelle, experienced "a feeling both of power and impotence. First of pride, pride at knowing that so high a tower is the symbol of his virility . . . and, at the same time, he had a feeling of quiet humility in the presence of the serious and incomparable potency of some indefinable male." When Genet describes the relationship of a girl queen to a male, he uses a comparison which recurs constantly, that of a spiral rolling about an upright rigidity. And this image evolves to the point of becoming a sexual motif which is reproduced by Nature everywhere. First, there is the *spectacle:*

"The girl queens are huddled together and chattering and cheeping around the boy queens who are straight, motionless and vertiginous, as motionless and silent as branches."

Then, the *gesture:*

"All the queens imparted to their bodies a tendril-like movement and fancied they were enlacing this handsome man, that they were twining around him."

Then, the *metaphor:*

"Round some, more upright, more solid than the others, twined clematis, convolvulus, nasturtium, little pimps too, tortuous."

Finally, the sexual pattern creeps into the perception: the sky in the middle of palaces becomes "the column of azure round which twines the marble."

But, inversely, this pansexualism is panmoralistic. Not a touch of sensuality in this universe. The penis is made of *metal;* Paulo's is a cannon. What excites Genet about a prick is never the flesh of which it is composed but its power of penetration, its mineral hardness. It is a drill, a pile driver, it will be a dagger, "a torture machine." The sex organ and the muscles are of the same nature: rods, iron bars, steel claws whose function is to subdue him in spite of himself, to support, by means of a foreign constraint, his will to be enslaved. Genet, as we have seen, loathes gratuitousness. To submit voluntarily would be pointless. That is what "normal" lovers do when they yield to the will of their mistresses. And they always retain the feeling that this submission is an act, that they are the masters. Genet's excitement requires that the servitude be effective, imposed. In order for him to feel that he belongs to the Other and that through this surrender he becomes the Other in his own eyes, the strength of the beloved must force him to the floor. Let the male violate him, bully him, beat him. Above all, he himself must not be able to break his chains on pain of death. Gorgui kills his mistress who wanted to leave him, Divine fears that Gorgui may kill "her." Erik despises the executioner because the latter has not killed him. Armand excites Genet more than anyone else because "his muscular power, visible in the shape of the skull and the base of the neck, further proclaimed, and imposed, these detestable qualities. It made them sparkle." Genet reads his fate in this muscularity, a horrible destiny of docility. Desire immediately reduces him to submission. But what is his desire if not dizziness? And what is dizziness if not a fall that is felt in advance and mimed in his flesh, the fall into the Other's heart from the top of the cliff that stands against the sky? The movement is relative. This penis rises up with the speed of Genet's fall, and the deeper the abyss into which Genet falls, the more dizzying is its height. At the bottom of the precipice the lover finds the corpse of the beloved who has fallen there before him: the fist that makes Genet grovel before the

pimp is one and the same as the Fatality that drives the latter to death. Thus, this universe of strongholds, minarets and bell towers, this phallic bristling of nature, is the vision of a man who is falling and who sees high walls rising above him and hiding the sun. Genet's sexuality is the dynamism of the fall, the gravity of Evil felt in the flesh. Bachelard would say that he has an "Icarus complex." In this sense, the sexual act proper represents the religious ceremony, which makes it possible to gather into an instant the infiniteness of daily submission. Genet undergoes Armand's brutality, his exigencies; he begs, steals and prostitutes himself for him; he laces his shoes, lights his cigarettes. All these jobs take time and patience. Servitude is a long-term undertaking; it is broken up into a thousand particular dislikes which conceal the whole. In order for him to enjoy them, there must be a violent contraction, a spasm which sums up everything in a moment, in short a *festival,* which is a kind of *sacred time* that emerges cyclically amidst profane time and endows the latter with new force. The sexual act is the festival of submission;* it is also the ritual renewal of the feudal contract whereby the vassal becomes his lord's liegeman.

But the posture of the officiants confers a new meaning upon this Black Mass. The beloved goes behind Genet and casually subjects him to his pleasure. Now, the Other, in Genet, the Thief, was also behind his consciousness. He maneuvered it, watched it, and it was unable to turn around to see. That was why Genet ended by projecting his nature upon another. But now that this other, who is lying on his back, crushes him, digs into him and penetrates him, Genet at last enjoys his Nature. He enjoys it with all his muscles, which grow taut so as to bear the enormous weight, enjoys it with his whole body, which stifles beneath this iron bulk. For him, the sexual act always resembles a rape. His submission does not exclude the frightful resistance of his pride, which is represented in his flesh by the vanquished resistance of his sphincter. But he enjoys this resistance and is glad that he is vanquished, for the struggle and the defeat lead him back to the original conflict between his will and itself, to the inner contradiction of the will-to-Evil. The agonizing thing about this conflict is not so much the fact that it was lived as that it was willed and acted, that he had to maintain, knowingly, a contradiction that asked only to vanish. But now an evil—and absolutely other—will is being substituted for the phan-

* At least such is its manifest aspect. We shall see later that it also represents the passion and ritual murder of the beloved.

tom will which he has been vainly trying to raise to the level of being. He thrashes about, but in vain. Each of his efforts to shake off the embrace makes him feel, through his impotence, the triumph of his Nature. He experiences the pleasure of *being acted upon* which he envied the murderer. The other is crushing his conscious will, his desire to preserve a semblance of dignity in abjection, to remain at the source of his actions. Another is penetrating him, furrowing him with suffering, and this other, who has been transformed into a torture machine, is the handsome lad whose venomous splendor he has been admiring. Beauty is painful, beauty is frightful. Behind its appearance is revealed the unbearable horror of the universe. The catastrophe is complete, the failure irremediable, but Genet's victory is thereby assured, since he wanted to play the game of loser wins. What is manifested through his humiliation, rage and pain is *at last* the presence of Evil. This visitation is effected, as is fitting, not by way of the noble parts, as in the mystics, who value intellectual intuition above all else, but by that of the ignoble parts, those meant for excretion. Are not Evil, the criminal and Genet himself the excrement of society? Even the burning sensation which he feels is ambiguous, contradictory in its essence. The homosexual does not know, in the griping ache of his pain, whether he is expelling excrement or opening himself to a foreign body. Rejection and acceptance are intimately mingled in the most immediate impression.

And yet, in this abject and ridiculous posture, amidst his suffering and his muck, it is nevertheless his God that he is receiving. This is apparent in the following reflection of Paulo, whom the Other pretends to be taking but finally does not take:

"He suffered when confronted with his newly acquired integrity, when confronted with his free and lonely personality, the solitude of which was revealed to him by the detachment of God himself. The blow made him feel a sorrow which might be expressed by the following reflection which I am making in his place: 'What can you do now without him?' "

Does this not have the ring of the mystic's laments in moments of aridity? But this dreadful God, this God in reverse, remains, to the very end, the opposite of God. The ecstasy of the passive homosexual is a torture. The inflexible male homosexual seeks in the girl queen only himself. He wants to coincide with the image he has glimpsed in submissive eyes. And when he thinks he has succeeded, the image dies as a result of being attained, and the desire with it: this is the orgasm. What becomes of Genet in all this? He

no longer counts; he is the instrument and the place; and this intoxicates him. When his consciousness was empty, it was still in the way; insofar as it remained conscious of being empty, it was present to itself, it still prevented him from being absorbed through all the pores of the beloved. But now it is a cask that has been broached. A hidden being has broken through it in order to join the appearance which it carries in front of it. Genet's evil Nature rips this spider's web in order to melt into the Being that he is in the eyes of others. The erect penis of the beloved is a sudden concretion of pure Being. Impaled by Being! Another, in pursuing only his pleasure, achieves for Genet the identification of Genet with himself. Crushed, compressed, perforated, consciousness dies so that the In-itself may be born.

This is a murder: submissive to a corpse, neglected, unnoticed, gazed at unmindfully and manipulated from behind, the girl queen is metamorphosed into a contemptible female object. She does not even have for the pimp the importance that the sadist attributes to his victim. The latter, though tortured and humiliated, at least remains the focal point of her tormentor's concern. It is indeed she whom he wishes to reach, in her particularity, in the depths of her consciousness. But the fairy is only a receptacle, a vase, a spittoon which one uses and thinks no more of and which one discards by the very use one makes of it. The pimp masturbates in her. At the very instant when an irresistible force knocks her down, turns her over and punctures her, a dizzying word swoops down upon her, a power hammer that strikes her as if she were a medal: "*Enculé!*"* This is the word that Querelle keeps turning over in his mind after giving himself to a man. It is striking that Genet regards the metamorphosis of an adolescent into a passive homosexual as an irremediable change, strictly comparable to the effect that the crime has upon the criminal. In order to cancel the murder which he has just committed by a countermurder of himself, Querelle lets himself be taken by Norbert. The murder of Vic had transformed him into that absolute and solitary object, the criminal. In order to escape his "amazing destiny," Querelle, like Green Eyes dancing in an effort to elude his crime, imagines himself being changed into *another object:* the girl queen. Thus, the sexual act which confers upon Genet a fairy's destiny renews the crisis that transforms him into a thief. In both cases, a child is pinned to the floor by the gazes of strong, cruel men. But this time the crisis is pro-

* *Enculé:* Literally, "one who gets buggered." As a term of abuse, it is the French equivalent of the English "cocksucker."—Translator's note.

voked, accepted, and, as in psychoanalytic treatment, acquires a cathartic value. As a rigorous identification of himself with the other and the other with himself, as a willed and ceremonial repetition of the original crisis, the intercourse is doubly sacred: it is the fatal instant; it gathers within itself all the evil elements of theft, crime and beheading. It is not surprising that all of Genet's rivers converge toward it, that all his propensities lead to it. It is his whole life condensed into a spasm, his whole past, his whole destiny. It is the accident which affected him with passivity forever, and it is the brave decision which transformed the catastrophe into a choice. It is the Kierkegaardian paradox. The opposites which coexist without merging are the sacred time of the mystic visitation and that of destruction. As opposed to the time of construction which extends to the far reaches of the future, it is the time of passive intuition and of being. It is eternity. In an instant Genet risks himself, transforms himself and damns himself forever. He loses his soul in an instant.

Sensual pleasure is rigorously excluded from this ceremony. The beauty which Genet serves is inflexibly severe. The male never caresses the girl queen. If he touches her, it is only to place her roughly in a position that will heighten his pleasure. What rightfully reverts to Genet is the suffering which is flight, which is self-hatred. He boldly demands it as his share. He says of an adolescent who is possessed by a pimp: "He desired only an increase of pain so as to lose himself in it." And another of his characters cries out, while being taken: "Kill me!" Even the orgasm is denied the lover, at least during intercourse. Or rather it is the lover himself who denies himself the right to ejaculate. If, out of kindness (which, be it added, is very rare), the beloved makes an effort to give him pleasure, he declines. Riton gently pushes Erik's hand away because "It was normal that Erik get pleasure from Riton, who was younger than he, and normal that Riton serve Erik." The lover, who is the beloved's slave, takes his pleasure alone, afterward, and hides himself to do so. Divine goes to finish off in the toilet—and quite likely he does not choose this unclean place at random—or else quickly and ashamedly masturbates behind Our Lady's back. The lover's pleasure is the upbeat. It is glossed over. It is already the moment of separation, of solitude. The downbeat is the pleasure of the beloved. They both exhaust themselves, amidst violence and pain, in serving it; they both sacrifice themselves so that the absolute, namely, the male's orgasm, may come into being. Thus, it is both true and false that Genet gets no pleasure during inter-

course. *There is* pleasure within him, deep in his martyrized flesh; only, it is the other who gets it. But the Other is his own Nature, himself as he is changed into himself. Little by little, as the thrusts which are tearing him apart become increasingly brutal, Genet begins to feel, deep inside him, the gradual birth of a phantom of pleasure, an urgent absence, *his* gratification insofar as he is the Other, his pleasure as *other pleasure,* an absolute begotten by his body, a pleasure which the movements of his loins cause the beloved to bring forth and which finally emerges beneath the sky, an autonomous and self-sufficient reality. Thus, the supreme moment of coitus is not that of abandon to natural plenitude, of letting go, of release of tension, of satisfied expectation. Quite the contrary, it is at the maximum of tension; his whole body grows taut and offers itself as a receptacle for the pleasure which grazes him, which inhabits him, which blossoms in the darkness of his bowels and of which he will never experience anything but the *reverse,* that is, suffering. Suffering is the necessary complement of the other's pleasure; he enjoys it as pleasure insofar as he is other. We are thus back at the generalized inversion that characterizes Evil, the will that is eager—since he is denied everything—to seize upon privation as the mark of plenitude, to be filled by emptiness. His pain is imaginary pleasure. He grows tense, gives himself, pants, swoons, in short makes all the movements and moans of a woman who is coming. In the case of the latter, however, this behavior accompanies the orgasm, it is its expression and effect, whereas in Genet it is a magical attitude that aims at *treating suffering as pleasure.* He imitates abandon at the price of extreme tension, he cries aloud and tosses about so that the pleasure he receives may become, in the eyes of invisible witnesses, the meaning of his attitudes. No one is more active than this homosexual who is called a passive homosexual. I would compare him to the frigid woman who strains against herself in an effort to feel an absent ecstasy. But there is a fundamental difference between them. The latter is actually rebelling against her frigidity. The phantom of pleasure which she finally attains seems to her only a makeshift. Genet, lord of Evil, deliberately substitutes appearance for being. He *could* give himself the orgasm, and refuses it. If he pursues this imaginary gratification, it is not in defiance of its unreality but because of it. The frigid wife looks forward to a stroke of luck, to a late awakening of her senses. Genet looks forward *to nothing.* At the core of the sexual act we find a mad desire for the impossible. The two stages of the sexual act both involve a structure of make-believe. The downbeat is a real presence

of the Other, a felt visitation and a virtual presence of pleasure; the upbeat of masturbation is a real presence of pleasure, but accompanied by fantasy: Divine masturbates while thinking of Our Lady, but Our Lady has come out of Divine and forgotten him. In the last analysis, it is this creative tension which is the goal. At the moment when he charges the Other with crushing his consciousness and shattering it, Genet, emperor of sham, remains a free and exasperated consciousness which supports, all by itself, an imaginary world. The highest moment of this consciousness is that in which it becomes a consciousness which forgets itself, a consciousness aware of forgetting itself, just as the highest moment of the criminal's life is that of his death. The summit of pride is the abyss of humility. It is when his God visits him that Genet, inverted mystic, is at the height of solitude.

This savage and contorted life, this exalted affirmation of the impossible, is followed by death, like the instant of beheading. Are not the "white flowers" which come out of the beloved's penis sisters of the red flowers which sprang from the decapitated body of Pilorge? The orgasm is the paradoxical instant of the most intense pleasure and of the end of pleasure. Within Genet the beloved dies. Genet senses this death and accompanies it. He suddenly relaxes, expands, "sinks into darkness," dies with the other's death: he swoons. Thus, beneath the constructions of his will, we find the foundation of his basic anxieties and his humble desire for suicide, a desire which is forever being rejected, repressed, forever being reborn. Indeed, it frequently happens that our most constantly repudiated primary desires give consistency and flesh to the acts of will that contradict them most, and there is thus a double determination of the most important acts of our life, which thus admit of two opposite interpretations. The dizziness that overcomes Genet in the presence of a handsome male certainly expresses this extraordinarily complex construction which causes Genet to choose to be the other and to find his destiny in the stately tragedy of capital punishment. But at the same time, this infinite fall is, in an obscure, in a muted way, a kind of leave which he grants himself: leave to die.

He does not die. Consciousness flows back, Genet is reborn from his ashes. The girl queen, who has been cut in two by the slaughterhouse knife, is glued together, emitting a slight fragrance of desolation. She survives herself, just as the child survived the malediction that killed him. The Other has withdrawn from her. She is empty. Nothing remains of the madness that convulsed her, nothing but

a bit of pain and blood. To the very end the Other has remained the Other; this pursuit of the impossible will have to be resumed over and over, indefinitely. Genet knows this, and that is what he wants. He knows that the identification of which he dreams can be effected only at the limit, that it is one and the same as the infinite movement of sexuality which is forever resumed. He wants it to be so. His day-to-day life as a slave drives him to the brief, tragic condensation of coupling, and the latter, in vanishing, drives him back to his entire life as a slave, to, as it were, his guarantee and his development. The instant sends him back to temporality in its entirety, and vice versa. Exhausted but not appeased, Genet gazes at the beautiful, tranquil appearance which has taken shape again beyond his reach, and he concludes: "Love is despair." But we now know that this despair is willed and that he first rejected the only chance of salvation through love: reciprocity.

He has refused it so utterly that he completes the sexual myth of the criminal by building a feudal system which he arranges with the express purpose of reserving the lowest place in it for himself. Imagine a small military or quasi-military community which evolves on the fringes of real society. One enters it by virtue of an initiation, the three major ceremonies of which are crime, theft and anal intercourse.This parasitic minority, which is composed of a noble caste and its mob of vassals, is not permitted to engage in any work. It lives on the work of the others, it is an association of consumers. Its members likewise have nothing to do with the system of large-scale industrial production and that of private property. It is not that they possess their property in common, for they possess nothing at all. They are nomadic or seminomadic and, by force of trickery, seize the belongings of the sedentary population and consume their booty on the spot. Cut off from contact with the forces of nature and knowing matter only in the state of manufactured products, they have not yet raised themselves to the plane of positive thought. They have not the slightest idea of determinism and of the laws of nature, and, though they usually live in the slums of big cities, nothing is more remote from them than the mentality of the proletariat. In fact, they bear a resemblance to the middle class in that they consider the course of the world to be governed by human wills. Their mind, which has remained fetishistic, is a compound of ceremonious politeness and aggressiveness. And as they cannot be bound among themselves by a hierarchy of functions based on division of labor, they justify social distinctions by differences of nature or essence and divide the members of their society into two

major categories: the tough and the soft. And the tough are tough by nature and for all eternity. Toughness is not identical with strength; it is rather the union of strength and meanness. In a duel between toughs, victory is not to the huskier or the better armed, but to the tougher, that is, to the one who is superior by nature. Similarly, the soft is soft by nature, and there is nothing he can do about it: "Divine is soft. . . . She is she-who-is-soft. That is, whose character is soft, whose cheeks are soft, whose tongue is soft. . . . With Gorgui, all is hard." The tough is a criminal, the soft a thief or beggar. They both destroy. But the criminal destroys man, whereas the thief destroys only the human significations which are *on* things, that is, he attempts, by the use he makes of the objects he steals, to efface the mark which their legitimate owner has left upon them.

Between toughs and softs the natural relationship is vassalage. The bond between man and object—the relationship based on production or appropriation—which characterizes our societies is replaced by the feudal person-to-person bond. The toughs do not possess things. Crime and theft procure for them the fleeting and hidden enjoyment of an object which remains duly possessed by its legal owner. But they possess men. The soft *pays homage* to the tough with his body; he becomes his liegeman.* The tough can allow himself to be as unfaithful as he likes; the soft must remain faithful to him or die. Thus, in *Raoul de Cambrai,* Bernier le Vavasseur keeps his faith in his lord who betrays him publicly. What does the tough give in return? His person, his protection. But let there be no misunderstanding: we have already seen that he never defended his vassals, that he let them be raped and massacred without lifting a finger. Singular kind of protection: without bothering about them, in fact seeming often to ignore their existence, he protects them against the great metaphysical fear inspired by contingency and freedom. As far as he is concerned, he does not act on anyone's behalf and derives his justification only from himself: "He is his own heaven." This is what constitutes his greatness and his weakness. He decides alone, he is his own witness, legislator and judge. No mission, no mandate, ever relieves him of his aloneness. That is why he allows himself to be cowardly, at times even, like Green Eyes, to betray. Law does not exist for him. It is he who defines law for the others. By virtue of this fact, he *gives,* he is *generous.* Thanks to him, there is law for the soft, an ethic, a supreme

* "Homage" derives from *homme,* the French word for "man."—Translator's note.

end. The vassal derives from his absolute obedience the actual justification of his existence. No doubt about it, he is born to serve. If he obeys, he becomes sacred, for he bears within him, like a relic, the chief's mandate. Genet says of Stilitano, for whom he smuggles dope, "Thanks to him, I was no longer going to cross a border for my own paltry needs but rather out of obedience, out of submission to a sovereign Power." And "realizing that it was through me that he had to act, I attached myself to him, sure of drawing strength from the elementary and disorganized power that shaped him." We find again in the sphere of action what we noted in connection with sexual possession: another crosses the border in the guise of Genet; the sovereign power is Genet's Nature or, if one prefers, inverted duty; it is Evil as supreme legislator of the universe. For all his vassals the Tough is the Roof, he is the Mandate. We are reminded of the strange perplexity of Kafka: "I am mandated," he said, "but mandated by *no one*." Thanks to Stilitano, to Armand, Genet can at times avoid this anxiety. The general mandate to do evil which he discovered within himself and which no one gave him is converted into particular mandates to steal, to prostitute himself, to smuggle dope. And these are given him by a person who is quite alive. The Tough is, to speak like Hegel, Evil transformed into absolute subject. That is why Genet can talk about the *kindness* of that inhuman brute Armand without surprising us. Armand is kind because he is a source of Being and justification. A hierarchy will be established among the toughs, and their place in it will depend on the height and breadth of the sky they shoulder and on the number of persons they shelter in their shade. "Here in the cell," says Green Eyes, a local squireen, "I'm the one who bears the brunt. . . . I need a strong back. Like Snowball. He bears the same weight. But for the whole prison. Maybe there's someone else, a Number One Big Shot, who bears it for the whole world." Thus, by an inversion dear to Genet, the virtue of the chiefs is cowardice, because it expresses the great and bitter anguish of solitude and freedom. Courage, on the other hand, is the vulgar quality of the vassals, who are no more a prey to anguish than are children to the moral problems which torment their parents. They receive a ready-made ethic, and it does not occur to them to question it. If they distinguish themselves, it is by doing more than is required of them and by risking everything, even death, in order to enhance themselves in their master's eyes. Thus, the greatest tenderness, the greatest kindness, which the lord can manifest toward his men is extreme severity. He need not fear to ask the impossible of them. Since it is from

him that they derive their Being and the particle of the Sacred which justifies their existing, it follows that the more redoubtable his demands the higher will they rise above themselves. If he tempts them by the Worst, by what is most difficult, by a mortal whim, he deserves to be worshiped. That is what Claudel does: his priests and judges practice temptation by Good upon Sygne, upon Prouhèze. In both cases, the master fascinates the creatures by values which they have not found themselves. In both cases, one decides without them as to their Evil or their Good. And in Claudel the Good is meant first to inspire terror whereas in Genet the terror practiced by the Big Shot is called kindness. This is quite to be expected: it is the same feudal dream. The only difference is that Genet is at the bottom of his hierarchy and Claudel at the top of his. In any case, in Genet the man-to-man relationship rigorously excludes reciprocity. It is neither a fellowship-in-work nor a brotherhood-in-arms. It is hardly a complicity. At times a word rises to his lips; he says: "It's *almost* a friendship." He would no doubt subscribe to the definition recorded by Gide in the *Journal of the Counterfeiters:* "A friend is a person with whom one would be glad to do a dirty job."

This vertical relationship is the axis of feodality about which are established horizontal relationships of juxtaposition. The Lords behave to each other as one power to another and give each other gifts. Snowball, who is at the top of the hierarchy, sends Green Eyes smiles, advice and cigarettes. And Green Eyes thinks: "Snowball is at my side." These ceremonies, however, cloak the true nature of their relations: they keep each other at a respectful distance. One might regard this as a kind of thieves' *justice,* taking the word in the sense used by Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human:* "Justice (equity) originates among men who are more or less equally powerful. . . . The idea of reaching an understanding arises where there is no clearly recognized predominant power and where a struggle would entail only mutual damage without result." It is rather clear that this justice is negative: if you don't touch me, I'll let you alone. Fundamentally, the toughs are united—except in the case of a job to be undertaken jointly—by bonds of "mechanical solidarity." They encounter each other, exchange greetings and avoid each other. Between the tough and the soft there is a transitory category: that of the young toughs, adolescents who have not yet assumed the toga virilis. Like the soft, they serve the Big Shots' pleasure, but the latter recognize them as being of their kind. These future criminals are hated and envied by the soft, to whom they

are superior in both virility and femininity. But, at the same time, the girl queens swoon in the presence of the masculine inflexibility which they sense in those youthful bodies. These contradictory feelings provoke diverse reactions: Lefranc, a girl queen, strangles Maurice, a future hero of crime. Divine, who is older than Our Lady, wants to subjugate him and treat him as a woman. He lets her have her way, just for the fun of it. But at the moment of possessing him, Divine swoons and, submissive despite herself, slides under him to be taken.

As for the soft, justice cannot reign among them since they derive their strength from that of the Master. And if they live in peace, it is a shadow of peace which falls from above. The Lord's caprice establishes amongst them a hierarchy which is always provisional and which he modifies as he sees fit. They therefore challenge the prevailing order by invoking yesterday's or tomorrow's favor. They loathe each other and spend their time fighting and playing dirty tricks on each other. At times they kill one another before the amused eyes of the master. Even when they are under iron discipline and resign themselves to tolerating one another, not the slightest suspicion of fellowship exists among them. In order to communicate among themselves, they must do so through the lord, even when he is away. And as they are not coordinated by division of labor, they live *juxtaposed.* Unlike harem women, they do not even make love among themselves because each is, for the other, the image of his abjection and his "bad smell." "We can't love each other in slavery," say Solange and Claire, the maids, whom Genet explicitly charges with representing passive homosexuals on the stage. And since, as we shall see, they are traitors by nature, they never think of betraying together. Genet writes of one of them: "He is loath to have me as a companion in abjection because I am less glamorous in his eyes than some other thief, less sparkling." In betrayal, as in love, the girl queen remains alone.

Such, then, is the society of criminals and thieves. Obviously it has no real existence, as Genet himself is careful to inform us; it is he who puts us on guard against the fables of cheap fiction: there is no solidarity in evil, no "band," no "gang"; at most, there are short-lived associations which come into being when a "job" is to be done, and then immediately break up. When choosing scapegoats, the society of the just was careful to remove their means of uniting. When it convinced them that they wanted to do evil, it intimated to them that they ought to make it a point of honor to remain alone. If they formed a group, they would discover a Good:

*theirs.* But what possible demand could unite them? Theft, crime and falsehood do not warrant being raised to the Universal. Moreover, the mythical society which Genet has built collapses as soon as you look at it. It is not even a "solitude in common," it is a juxtaposition of individual solitudes. Among tough and soft alike, the only bonds are hatred, mistrust and indifference. And the vertical relationship, which serves as a backbone to this pseudo-community, the passive homosexual's sexual and feudal relationship with the criminal, protects neither one nor the other against loneliness. Homeless, with no rule other than the one he has given himself, the tough, upright as a penis, pierces the sky and drifts into the void. And the soft, that fidgety zealot, rushes into slavery and abjection to find solitude. Even in copulation they are alone.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Genet dreamed of this society for a long time and thought for a moment he had found a perfect image of it in Darnand's militia, which was both criminal and military.* The reason for this is clear. Rejected by the inmates of Mettray, having become, for the second time, a scapegoat and butt, he again resorted to the method which had worked for him once before: he began earnestly to will the situation in which he had been placed so as to have at least the satisfaction of transcending fortune by heightening its rigors. He could not be satisfied with accepting abjection as a contingent and provisional effect of circumstances; that would have been resignation. Since others were the makers of his misfortune, his only resort, if he meant to keep the initiative, was to raise it to the absolute and regard it as a condemnation by the universe. In like manner, Nietzsche, at Sils Maria, demanded the eternal recurrence of his sufferings. The invention of the "breed of the soft" is Genet's eternal recurrence. He would have been ashamed to attribute others' contempt for him to his extreme youth, to a lack of force which could have been only temporary. He wanted to merit this contempt on the grounds of his deeper nature and he wanted it to be beyond appeal. The Mettray Reformatory, which was an artificial society, in a vacuum, a society of youngsters, a secret society, certainly offered an embryonic form of initiatory rites. Sporadic adumbrations of feodality must have occasionally exposed the weaker boys to the persecution of a few bullies. Genet carried these indications to extremes, developed them, linked them up and constructed the myth of criminal feodality. Let us not forget

* At least, so he says in *Funeral Rites.* This quite platonic admiration was not, of course, followed by any actual enlistment.

that his first calamity was of social origin. He constructed his new misfortunes in the image of the old and willed them social because the relationship to the social is the constituent element of his person. He conceived a criminal society in which he had the lowest rank so that condemnation by that black community would be in the image of the one which had been issued against him by the community of the just. He can now be satisfied: banned by a criminal feodality, itself banned by real society, he has sunk straight down to the lowest depths of abjection and despair, into the inhuman.

But this relentlessness should arouse our suspicion. On the flyleaf of a copy of *Funeral Rites* which I once had in my hands Genet had scrawled: "Jean Genet, the weakest of all and the strongest." What if he cried up his weakness only to prepare a reversal? The truth is that Genet's undertaking constantly shifts from essentialism to existentialism. His aim is to regain his being so as to ensure his salvation. But when he has established himself in the core of his essence, he realizes that he has derived it only from himself, and the reversal, analogous to that effected by Auguste Comte, is achieved under the name of subjective synthesis: the objective system in its entirety and the very place occupied in it by Genet suddenly appear in the lighting which Genet gives to them. It is consciousness that draws them from the darkness and maintains them in being. Just as the impossibility of Evil will presently refer us to the subjective will to achieve the impossible, so the dark society refers us to the creative consciousness which has isolated it from experience and which manifests it. The same movement which makes of Genet a martyr who has been crushed by the world launches an inverse movement at the end of which Genet will find himself as a constituent consciousness. Whereupon the beloved, with all his self-importance, moves to the rank of the inessential, and it is the aching consciousness of the lover which becomes essential. Genet himself relates an experience which enables us to grasp this reversal in a scene taken from life:

"Regarding revelation, there is not much I can say, for all I know of it is what was granted me to know, thanks to God, in a Yugoslav prison."

A score of prisoners are practicing the art of picking pockets to while away the time. One of the prisoners has fallen asleep. Their aim is to remove the objects in his pockets and then put them back without waking him. When Genet's turn comes, he faints. He is carried to the other end of the cell, near the window: "In the other corner, standing in a bunch, were the other men. They looked at

me and burst out laughing. As I did not know their language, one of them pointed at me and made the following gesture: he scratched his hair, and, as if he had pulled out a louse, made a show of eating it . . . it was at that moment that I understood the room. I realized —for a fraction of a second—its essence. It remained a room, though a prison of the world. I was, through my monstrous horror, exiled to the confines of the obscene (which is outside the scene of the world), facing the graceful pupils of the school of light-fingered theft. I saw clearly . . . what that room and those men were, what role they were *playing:* it was a major role in the march of the world . . . it seemed to me suddenly, thanks to a kind of extraordinary lucidity, that I understood the system. The world dwindled, and its mystery too, as soon as I was cut off from it. It was a supernatural moment."

Let us try to understand, that is, to sympathize. Let us imagine Genet excluded from the social world, imprisoned, thrown among a group of men who do not speak his language. As soon as he enters the cell, the others unite against him solely because of this mutual lack of understanding. Thus, by virtue of its essential structure the situation reproduces symbolically that of Mettray and the double exile from which he suffered. The other prisoners invite him by gestures to simulate a theft. The best way of assimilating himself would be to obey and, above all, to succeed, to pass the test. The difficulty of communicating would no doubt remain an obstacle; he must give up all hope of occupying a choice place in this little group. But at least he would be left in peace. However, he seems to refuse this integration. Rather than pass unnoticed, he actually courts mockery, he chooses the role of buffoon. A strange fainting fit. The theft involved no danger. Had he awakened the sleeper, he would have incurred a less serious condemnation than he did for the sudden swoon. His cellmates would perhaps have made allowances for his inexperience, for his clumsiness. In refusing to submit to the ordeal, he revealed to them a far graver, an inexpiable flaw: that he was not of their kind. Underlying this negative behavior we discern a secret will to be rejected, to demand the lowest rank for want of being able to have the highest, in short, an attitude of failure. But this is not the only nor perhaps the chief cause of his conduct. I allow, of course, for physical fatigue, fear, disgust. Yet there is something else: Genet fainted *because the theft was fictive.* Impelled by hunger, by necessity, he had already stolen a thousand times. In fact, it was for a theft that he had been imprisoned. But then the urgency of his needs and their necessity had not left him the leisure to consider his act; the things themselves

had suggested it to him. It had appeared as a spontaneous reaction to the demands of the situation. On the other hand, the theft which they propose to him is a game, a piece of play acting. Since it is a foreign society which calls upon him to perform, the act becomes a challenge, a test, a comparison, in short a public ceremony which should conclude with his being granted the sacred title of *thief.* As he approaches his sleeping cellmate, Genet feels the gazes of initiates converging on his back. His attempted theft is a re-enactment, in the same sense in which an accused person and the district attorney's staff are taken to the scene of the crime for the purpose of re-enacting the crime. In this tomb, the factitious and public offense becomes a pure repetition of the original crisis. Genet, who is requested to *enact* his first theft, finds himself in the exact situation of a patient who is asked by a modern psychiatrist to enact his obsessions on a stage. He is *possessed,* in the realm of the imaginary, by his fundamental behavior. He responds to this possession by adopting a form of conduct which he has always rejected *in reality* but which remains his most constant temptation: to let go, to slip away into nothingness, to kill himself. In everyday life he survives each theft because to steal is to will to survive. But since he is being offered an opportunity to recommit his first theft fictively, he will treat himself to the luxury of giving it the solution which it entailed logically and which he dismissed. He satisfies himself in the realm of the imaginary by a symbolic suicide, just as, in a brothel, certain depraved customers poetically satisfy their desire to reign by putting a cardboard crown on their head and surrounding themselves with naked slaves who are paid at a fixed rate per hour. Thus, Genet's fainting fit has a threefold meaning: this proud, deliberate failure, this anarchistic refusal to be integrated into the community of crime, is the symbolic death of the child who was caught by adults and the imaginary actualization of a solution which Genet rejected in order "to live out the impossibility of living." This "loss of his wits," like the terminal swoon of the sexual rape, is the sudden, spasmodic abandon of a mind that rejects abandon.

So he dies. And when he regains consciousness he is dead, as he gathers from his reclining, corpselike position, off to the side, and from the sight of the huddled group of men who are insulting him in a foreign language. He has been exiled, and it was he himself who arranged matters so as to provoke the exile. Everything concurs in making him see the situation from the viewpoint of the radical rejection of all human signification, that is, from the viewpoint of death. For man's actions appear normal only to those who,

to speak like the Germans, base the *mit-Sein* on the *mit-Machen.* The strangest mores of the most out-of-the-way societies will, in spite of everything, be relatively comprehensible to the person who has a flesh-and-blood knowledge of man's needs, anxieties and hopes. If, on the other hand, this experience is lacking, he will not even be able to understand the customs of those about him. As for Genet, he wants nothing, does nothing, rejects all fellowship with men and obliges them to reject all fellowship with him. Like Querelle, that corpse who left his grave to go prowling about among the living, he is separated from the compact little group of Yugoslav thieves by a transparent and unpassable nothingness. This experience is possible only in a society which carries parasitism to an extreme and whose members are, as it were, spoon-fed. But what society can be more parasitic than that of prisoners whose food is served at fixed times by a guard? The live dead-man is dead as a producer and alive insofar as he consumes. In any case, Genet, who has withdrawn from the cycle of praxis, who has "fallen outside the human," is here a pure gaze. And the only feeling that accompanies his passive contemplation, his astonishment at the strangeness of the world, is that which invades certain mental patients when they have what is called "attacks of depersonalization." They think they are dead, or else it is other people who seem to them to be corpses. The slightest gesture seems to them comic and terrible at the same time. In general, "depersonalized" individuals are dissatisfied with themselves and their lives; they are frequently imbued with a crushing sense of guilt. The following passage from Dr. Hesnard's *Univers morbide de la faute* seems to apply rather exactly to Genet's fainting and to the amazement which followed it:

". . . he abandons all systematic adaptation to this changed situation since it has less and less meaning for him, like existence itself. [He] actualizes what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the disease of the *Cogito.*' . . . Should this lowering of moral existence which crudely abolishes all conflict be regarded as a kind of deeper defense, an organic or biological defense which, in order to avoid living the Prohibition, consists in living henceforth only in a singular but still living world which has no name in any language and which means nothing to others if not to oneself? A romantic and mystical conception of this kind is to be found in the Freudian notion of integral narcissism."* And further on: "The schizophrenic no longer has the ethical sense of existence insofar as he no longer has an existence."

* Hesnard adds that he does not subscribe to Freud's "integral narcissism."

But Genet is a touchstone that enables us to determine the limits of psychoanalytical interpretation. We have already seen that the concepts of "stereotyped revival of the original crisis," "narcissism" and "sado-masochism" cannot, as such, apply to his case because an uncritical use of them may lead one to regard as rough data of a psychosis what is actually the labor of a freedom relentlessly working out its salvation. The same holds for the case with which we are concerned at the moment. To be sure, when Genet regains consciousness, he finds himself *in the situation* of a depersonalized individual, but he transcends this situation by using his depersonalization as an instrument of knowledge. The word *revelation* characterizes it sufficiently, for it means both that the aspect of the world is imposed and that Genet has the power to transform this vision into a teaching. Indeed, he takes advantage of the fact that he is no longer immersed in the universe or constrained to assume human ends, and considers them, for once, *from without*. To his critical and unbiased eyes, they appear as simple facts. *It is a fact* that the human species pursues one or another end, as does the species of bees or ants. Having dropped to the rank of pure empirical data, values also lose their urgency and seriousness. Men *play* at being thieves. Play is at the origin of the world. There is *world* (that is, a close connection between human society and nature) when collective conventions establish the rules of the game. The only effect of these conventions, which are absurd and gratuitous, is to transform human activity, in all domains, into a ballet. Let us bear in mind here that prison and play have always been the favorite symbols of thinkers who have attempted to describe human activity by placing themselves outside the human. I am thinking particularly of Pascal, Nietzsche and Kafka. If only Genet had extended his experience to the ethical activities of respectable men he would have been delivered from Evil forever; Good and Evil would have collapsed together, would have become outworn conventions. But Genet is dead set against such an extension. Good is the vulture that gnaws at his liver, and he values his vulture. He wants to save himself *with* Good and *against* it. It is Evil which is a ballet. We now see the matter more clearly: if the world of Evil is only a play of appearances and conventions, it depends on the consciousness of the spectator who contemplates it. Genet's gaze is necessary to transform all those men—who insult him and then tiptoe across the cell to remove a filthy handkerchief from an open pocket—into ballerinas, into "*graceful* pupils of the school of light-fingered theft." *Graceful:* this is the word that enlightens us. Mysti-

fied by conventions which are established through them and almost in spite of them, the prisoners pursue absurd enterprises with the utmost seriousness. Their only justification will be the gracefulness of their gestures, that is, *the appearance.* We have already seen that the criminal is only a graceful and terrible appearance. But an appearance requires a consciousness to grasp and fix it; without a spectator it disappears. Thus, the world's secret all at once passes into Genet's consciousness: it is his consciousness which becomes essential. But in order for this to have happened, he first had to be dismissed from the corps de ballet. Were it not for this exclusion, which he provoked, he would still be dancing with the others, doing his utmost to describe the figures of a masked ball for an invisible audience. To roll out of the world through a mudhole is, like breaking through its ceiling with a flap of the wings, a way of emerging from it and of becoming its incorruptible witness. *Abjection* is a methodical conversion, like Cartesian doubt and Husserlian *epoche:* it establishes the world as a closed system which consciousness regards from without, in the manner of the divine understanding. The superiority of this method to the other two lies in its being lived in pain and pride. It therefore does not lead to the transcendental and universal consciousness of Husserl, the formal and abstract thinking of the Stoics or the substantial *cogito* of Descartes, but to an individual existence at its highest degree of tension and lucidity; it is master of itself and of all others since it accepts them only insofar as it manifests them. At the very moment when Genet submits to their force, he reduces them to being only shadows and to existing only through him. This is the chief source of what he will later call his *betrayals.* A work of Genet's, like Hegel's phenomenology, is a consciousness which sinks into appearances, discovers itself in the depths of alienation, saves itself and relegates things to the rank of *its objects.* Consciousness is treacherous because it obeys only in order the better to dominate. At the end of *Deathwatch,* Genet brings out in strong relief the contrast between the fatal criminal and the faker, who is a criminal by imposture but a free spirit:

GREEN EYES: You don't know the first thing about misfortune if you think you can choose it. I didn't want mine. It chose me.

LEFRANC: I'm stronger than you. My misfortune comes from something deeper. It comes from myself.

GREEN EYES: I'm calling the guards. You'll know by the look on their mugs whether you can be with us or not.

LEFRANC: Green Eyes!
GREEN EYES: You bastard!
LEFRANC: I really am all alone!

It is the contradiction between these two misfortunes, one unconscious and noble, the other conscious and abject, the first despising the second, the second dissolving the first, that accounts for the peculiar tension of Genet's works. Because he wants to do and to be, to be in order to do and to do in order to be, he is, at one and the same time, the master, the slave and their merciless struggle. For the master does nothing; he is. And the slave is not; he does. Genet gives himself servilely to various masters who are only passing images of himself. Wishing *to be,* he makes himself a thing and submits to the reign of things; everything fades into pure subjectivity. But the inner contradiction of willing-being breaks forth and manifests itself in an unexpected dialectic: those pure objects which crush him, those handsome, unconscious masters, resolve in turn into pure appearances, and this world of appearances refers to the true subject *for whom* the appearances exist. The horrible universe surrounding him changes into a graceful ballet. At the limit of the quest for being, just after the engulfment of consciousness, being reveals its secret weakness: it *was* only insofar as it *appeared,* and consciousness rises up again from its own ashes in the absolute solitude of an aesthetic solipsism. Carried to its ultimate consequence, the quest turns against itself, corrodes the real and allows only the seeker-of-self as pure consciousness to subsist. What, then, remains of the feodality of crime and of the glamorous murderous-looking pimps? Nothing. Ballet figures that are directed by Genet himself. The notorious "maliciousness" of homosexuals is due in part to their having at their disposal, simultaneously, two systems of reference: sexual rapture transports them to a platonic climate; each of the men they seek is the passing embodiment of an Idea; it is *the* Sailor, *the* Parachute Trooper that they want to embrace through the husky who lends himself to their desire. But as soon as their desire is satisfied, they re-enter themselves and consider their wonderful lovers from the angle of a cynical nominalism. Good-by to essences, farewell archetypes, there remain only commonplace and interchangeable individuals. "But I didn't know," a homosexual once said to me, pointing to a little Montparnasse hoodlum, "that that young man was a MURDERER!" And the following day: "Adrien? A dull little faggot."

These remarks enable us to consider Genet's sexuality in its other aspect, that of hatred.

For he no doubt loves these tough, handsome pimps. But we know what this love is. He gets knocked down, with humiliation and horror, by their brutal force. What he seeks in them is himself, and this quest ends in failure. Penetration by the male leaves him *other,* filled *emptily* with a nothingness of pleasure. The disappointment is foreseen and repeated a hundred times. What can this vainly accepted abjection engender if not hatred? He cries out in *Our Lady of the Flowers:* "Oh those males, I hate them lovingly!"

And in *Funeral Rites:*

"I loved him out of hatred . . ."

And again:

"My hatred of the militiaman was so strong and so beautiful that it was equivalent to the most sturdy love."

He writes about Paulo:

"Abandoned on my bed, he will be, naked, polished, an instrument of torture, a vise, a dagger ready to function, functioning by its mere presence, which was evil, and springing, pale and with clenched teeth, from my despair. It is my despair become flesh."

His love is a desperate attempt to *become* them; it is therefore accompanied by hatred. He hates them for *not already being* him. He loves them because he needs them in order to submit to the worst, but he hates them precisely because he asks them to subjugate him. This should not surprise us. I would even say that the hatred is born first, and, since he has made it a personal rule to have no tastes other than distastes which have been overcome, it is the most hateful that he will love most. Is not this the necessary consequence of his original choice to do evil, that is, to will what he does not want?

"Culafroy and Divine, with their delicate tastes, will always be forced to love what they loathe, and this constitutes something of their saintliness, for that is renunciation."

And, finally, the sexual act itself is a distaste which has been overcome. When Genet plunges into his long excremental descriptions of anal intercourse, he irresistibly brings to mind Marie Alacoque gathering up the dejecta of sick persons with her tongue. He frequently boasts of loving in a state of queasiness, but there are times when he also complains of it: "To hate is nothing, but to love what one hates causes loathing. To kiss him or let oneself be kissed by him was little, but it was a great deal to be aroused and to come as a result of the kisses given and received." This hatred, which is

willed and sought at the core of love, is already a betrayal; the first time he submits to Armand's pleasure, he writes: "Crushed by that mass of flesh, which was devoid of the slightest spirituality, I experienced the giddiness of finally meeting the perfect brute, indifferent to my happiness." Hence all the unconscious brutes are interchangeable "masses of flesh." It is no longer the beloved in his particularity that Genet desires, but rather pure generality. Earlier, it was the lover who represented the interchangeable universal; but now the universal moves into the beloved. In taking his pleasure, Armand, who is dominated by instinctive forces, becomes an instrument that Genet maneuvers at the dictate of his tortuous ends. A woman receives pleasure insofar as she gives it, and whatever the violence, in other respects, of the sexual conflict between her and her lover, she has not leisure to betray him at the moment he satisfies her. But Genet, precisely because he rejects pleasure, has full latitude, at the height of the other's pleasure, to practice mental restriction: "My imagination invents for them the following humiliations. I let one of them [subdue me]. He enters me until he becomes myself, to the point of taking up, by the presence of his prick alone, all the place which I occupy, and then, at the extreme moment of leaving my personality, I attract to myself the memory of another male to whom I offer myself."

But there is a worse kind of treason, and it is the male himself who provides the occasion for it. It should first be noted that in Genet's world fellatio is regarded as the function of the passive homosexual; it is a part of the service that the latter renders to his lord. The symbol of the worm that comes to life again in Pierrot's mouth and that he makes himself suck would suffice to prove that fellatio is particularly ignominious,* that it is more repulsive than anal intercourse. But I shall now quote a strange passage, which will set us on a quite other path. This time it is Genet himself who makes a try at playing the male role, who takes a stand with rigidity as Divine once did and as did Lieutenant Seblon another time. But the thief to whom he addresses himself looks at him with contemptuous surprise: "I knew his contempt. He came very near to dissolving me like a sugar candy. I had to preserve my rigidity, though not too fixedly."

A rigidity that melts beneath contempt like barley sugar on the tongue: the image has deep roots. We now know the secret weakness of the handsome pimp's rigidity: it melts on the tongue. Thus,

* Not in itself, but because it is in this case without reciprocity.

at the heart of his submission Genet takes his revenge: the aim of his caresses is the softening of the male. And when the latter, exhausted, finally collapses and becomes limp, a sentiment which his false slave thought had died in his childhood rises from the depths and comes to life again: *tenderness.* Tenderness, immediate reaction of the lover to the devirilization of the beloved. Emptied, drooping, a piece of wet rag, the virile member is no longer formidable. It was a cannon, a tower, a torture machine; it becomes flesh, it can be stroked lightly without springing up. As we saw earlier, the hardness of the pimp's erect penis and his compact, terrible force were one and the same. The drooping of the one symbolizes the vanishing of the other. In giving himself to the tough pimps, Genet becomes a trap; they are caught in his pestilential swamps and their virility abandons them. In the last analysis, fellatio is castration. Coitus is the systematically pursued death of the beloved. Caught, possessed *in appearance,* Genet, at the moment of his false pleasure, feels the false possession take a sharp turn and then collapse. In the presence of the castrated male who rolls over on his back and releases him from his weight, Genet's consciousness remains alone and pure and, by a premeditated reversal, the penis of the passive homosexual, still erect because he has refused pleasure, bears witness to his vigilance. Genet will later find an epic symbol for this omnipotence of the weakest: Hitler. Hitler declares in *Funeral Rites*—and it is Genet who speaks through his mouth: "I, puny and ridiculous little man, unloosed upon the world a power extracted from the pure and clear beauty of athletes and hoodlums. For nothing but beauty could have elicited such a burst of love as that which every day, for seven years, caused the death of strong and fierce young creatures." Every day Genet, too, causes the death of fierce young men. And their death imparts to him "a power extracted from their beauty." Coitus is a grafting. Genet, the praying mantis, devours his male. Tenderness is then born, a quiet, triumphant, maternal superiority. It is a deliverance and a joy, a feeling of security in the face of the evident fact that the most rigid hardness conceals a deep softness. Tenderness and pity go hand and hand when tenderness wells up in an inferior and is addressed to a waning superior. Genet will write about Pilorge, a formidable murderer who was guillotined: "It was when I could say 'poor kid' that I loved him." But did he not claim earlier that execution was an apotheosis, that the beheaded criminal became even more terrible? Yes, of course, but it was a trap, a booby trap. Those fierce fellows will run into it with their

heads down, and then they will become children who die prematurely, like Vergil's Marcellus or the child Septentrio.

For, let us not forget, the male also represents the adult who condemned Genet to do evil. He is the terrifying archangel whose flaming sword defends the entrance to Paradise. The fire goes out and the sword bends: it was tin, coated with phosphorus. A judge's eyes close. In reducing the big chief to this sprawling mildness, Genet has *killed the law*. The sacrifice of the Male puts an end to the Old Testament. His great passion on the scaffold is only the heroic symbol of the little bedroom passion which he renews each day. With the law dead and the archangel disarmed, the murdered child comes to life again in Genet. Delivered from adults, he can love like a child, he can love the child in the young tough who has been reduced to impotence. That little penis is a childhood figure, a rag doll. Genet's tenderness goes from childhood to childhood, and it is his own childhood that he finds in the beloved.

*The child dead in me*
*Long before the ax chops off my head,*

says Pilorge, and we do not know whether he is speaking for himself or for Genet. The defeat of the archangel reopens the gates of the lost paradise. After the purifying repetition of the crisis, a human sacrifice restores to Genet the sweet confusion with the world, restores innocence. Not for long: the male will soon come to life again, will rise up with renewed indifference. Genet's tenderness is shot through with despair. It is going to wane into desolation. It is only a respite from hell, for it was born of a failure: Genet has been unable to become the other. However, we shall encounter it again, for it is, with poetry, one of the paths which will lead him to salvation.

For the time being, he must take precautions against the awakening of the male. First, he must carefully conceal this melting mood. It doesn't mean a thing to the beloved. If he sensed that he was the object of a gentle affection, half childish, half maternal, he would feel obscurely that the sources of his virility were being attacked. He would respond with anger. "What's eating you?" asked Armand with annoyed astonishment when, after lovemaking, Genet once went so far as to kiss the bend of his arm, the only spot on the body where the flesh remains as soft as a child's. The girl queen will therefore carry on the systematic labor of devirilization in secret. Genet will make a relentless effort to discover a secret femininity in all the toughs who subdue him. In his books, he pro-

duces these great criminal figures, who at first delude us, only to amuse himself slyly by putting them into female situations: Querelle, the most male of them all, forces himself to become a passive homosexual, then acquires a taste for such pleasures; Armand, the toughest of them, earns his living by doing lacework; Erik is raped by the executioner; Stilitano is a coward, Green Eyes a squealer. But Darling Daintyfoot should be given particular attention, for it is in his case that Genet has shown most clearly the stages of a concerted labor of feminization.

Darling at first pays no attention to Divine; he lets himself be worshiped. For him "Divine is barely a pretext, an occasion." Little by little, very discreetly, without even admitting it to himself, he grows attached to her and thereby becomes feminized: "It took [him] some time to get used to talking about her and to her in the feminine. He finally succeeded, but did not tolerate her talking to him as to a girl friend. Then, little by little, he let her do it. Divine dared say to him, 'You're pretty.' "

Little by little Divine's very gestures settle into him and the metamorphosis is complete:

"Inadvertently certain gestures, though very restrained, certain mannerisms of Divine escaped him. At first, he had dared a few just for the fun of it, but slyly, little by little, they were conquering the stronghold, and Darling did not even notice that he was shedding his skin. It was at a later time . . . that he realized the falsity of what he had blurted out one evening: 'A male that fucks another male is a double male.' "

A male that fucks another male is not a double male: he is a female without realizing it. In the end, by settling into Darling, Divine's feminine gestures lead him to his downfall: he will steal, as she does, and will be caught. In like manner, Divine's odd, mad, poetic inventions will gradually corrupt Our Lady, the young male "with a single possibility." If he adopts any one of them, the gesture will be incongruous, like surrealist feathers on a statue; it will arouse the attention of the detectives and will lead to the discovery of his crime.

"Here we must perhaps recognize Divine's influence. She is present wherever the inexplicable arises. She, the Giddy One, strewed in her wake traps, artful pitfalls, deep dungeon cells . . . and because of her the minds of Darling, Our Lady and their cronies bristle with incredible gestures. With their heads high, they take falls that doom them to the worst of fates."

The girl queens are soft and poisonous. They cause the slightest

seed of femininity in their males to sprout and flower. And this diligent labor is only the sublimation of the sexual activity of *deflation* that we described above.

The *same reality* is the object of a simultaneous double operation: Genet elevates it with one hand while lowering it with the other. On the one hand, he claims to have a little of Armand's "severe kindness" which consists "in his transforming into a revel, into a solemn and ridiculous display, what is only a contemptible desertion of duty," and to share his concern, "which was rehabilitation. Not of others or of himself, but of moral wretchedness." But, on the other hand, he himself dissolves the flamboyant appearances which he has just painted into "wretchedness," "vileness," "a contemptible desertion of duty." With a spontaneous movement he heads for the myth, he adorns the little tramps of the criminal world with a tragic brilliance, but only to arrange them, to scatter them in unknotted sheaves of weaknesses, of loosely bound gestures, of chance. He has revealed to us the secret of this method at the end of a splendid poem in which he applies to prisons the terms usually reserved for palaces: "Their gravity makes me consider them without pity. I recognize that they have their foundations within myself; they are the signs of the most violent of my extreme tendencies and my corrosive spirit is already working at their destruction." Genet commands two powers: one, which is mythological, comes to him from gestures, from ceremonies, from language; the other, which is "corrosive," comes from his analytical mind. One does not exist without the other; they condition each other; one subdues him, without force, to the cruel beauty of the universe, and the other delivers him by obliging this beauty to depend on his consciousness. By means of the first he makes manifest the Other, the shimmering world of essences into which he wants to melt, and suddenly, just as he is about to lose himself in it, he re-establishes himself in his pure existence, his cold breath extinguishes the phantasmagoria. It is in order to make the castration more magnificent that he models the males as granite-like erections. And that is what gives his works their so profoundly, so paradoxically human character. For at a first reading we do not detect the unceasing ravages caused by these two conflicting activities which work at *digesting* a too coriaceous reality. At first, we do not discern in Genet the insect eager to sting its victim's nerve centers in order to paralyze it, drag it into its cave and devour the corpse alive; it is to something quite other that we are sensitive, to a wearied but tenacious effort to transcend everyday reality and attain beauty without in any way

renouncing a ruthless lucidity. This effort is manifest in spite of Genet himself; it is he who expresses himself in the sentence I quoted earlier: "Transforming into a revel *what is only* a contemptible desertion of duty." And this maintaining of values (aesthetic ones, it is true) within the most utter despair is something which I do not fear to call grandeur.

This grandeur, which is still only embryonic and which will attain its full development later, springs, nevertheless, from a humiliated adolescent's amorous hatred of the handsome big shots of Mettray. Its origin lies in a premeditated betrayal. Note, rather, how the virtues with which he adorns the beloved are at the same time the instruments which will make it possible to dissolve him. Riton's beauty is even more beautiful for his being unaware of it. Were he conscious of it, it would become artifice, dressing. And Genet swoons before this mute, quite mindless flower. But let us beware: this ecstasy is already a betrayal, for what he actually loves in Riton is something quite different from what Riton thinks he is and wants to be. Ignoring the beloved's deeper intentions, efforts and activities, inverted love is the opposite of Pascalian esteem-love. For in esteem-love I espouse the will of the person I love, I adopt her values, and I am willing to judge her acts—severely—be it only in the name of her own principles. Quite the contrary, the girl queen, at the height of bliss, despises her males and commits the affront of regarding what they undertake as worthless. In short, her love is nothing other than a hostile decision to treat certain lords of the earth as objects. Far from adhering to their principles, Genet snuffs out their freedom, for he claims to appreciate in them only the qualities of which they are unaware and which they cannot want to acquire without spoiling everything. He adopts the same attitude toward the aristocracy of crime that Proust does toward the nobility. Proust, too, loves the Guermantes for reasons of which they are unaware, and when they think they are interesting him by what they say or by their merits, he delights in the fact that he is fooling them. All he asks of them is that they be myths, heraldic animals, figures in a tapestry, so that he can admire them in his solitude. His hero, a commoner who is made much of by princes, is as profoundly treacherous in a Faubourg St. Germain drawing room as Genet in the Mettray Reformatory. They both have wicked souls, that is, souls which are solitary and tender, fabulous and corrosive. This is not surprising, for analysis and myth are, in the passive homosexual, the double revenge of passivity.

The magnificent words which celebrate the criminal are two-edged. The tragic unconsciousness of Our Lady is also the most profound stupidity. His impenetrability is not a massiveness of mind, but rather so total a void that nothing can fill it. The Tough is *hollow*. There is nothing in him but the vague and foolish dream of appearing tough. To be tragic, handsome, noble, frightening is to depend completely on the opinion of others. It is not without reason that the heroes of our tragedies are kings and emperors; it is not without reason that Genet compares his heroes to emperors and kings. And if he often presents them as military leaders, it is because, as Gide has said, "The leader is a man who has need of others"—and, indeed, is nothing other than the opinion which others have of him.

"I . . . knew that Stilitano was my own creation and that it depended upon me to destroy it."

It was *by submission* that he learned it. We saw him leave on an expedition, happy to find his justification in the will of a sovereign power. But by the same token he frees himself: the mission was easy, Stilitano could have carried it out himself and had no need to send him "to expose himself to the danger of being caught in his stead." Whereupon Genet "dimly suspects him of being incapable of an act involving his whole person." Like the Hegelian slave, he frees himself through obedience, fear and work; he realizes that he is his master's truth and that the latter without his servant is merely a shadow. But in the case of the slave, liberation is achieved by revolt because submission was a constraint. In the case of Genet, it will be achieved by betrayal because submission is voluntary. Inessential to Stilitano, treated as a thrall, as a pure pretext, he suddenly discovers that it is through him that Stilitano exists. This discovery should shatter his bonds: quite the contrary, it attaches him. He submits to Stilitano all the more in that he sees clearly that Stilitano can do nothing without him. He keeps his balance on the infinitely narrow ridge that separates submission from revolt. That is what makes him write the following astonishing sentence: "Had he revealed himself to me by a rather considerable number of bold deeds in which I had been forbidden to take part, thus becoming both cause and end, Stilitano would have lost all power over me." It is at the very antipodes of esteem-love that he situates his love. If Stilitano were really courageous, really strong, really able, he would no longer be lovable, he would be self-sufficient, he would therefore no longer need Genet, and thereupon Genet would no longer need him, for, in the last analysis, he needs only the need

which his master has of him. Cowardly, empty, feminine, Stilitano is only an incomplete creature. The virility and courage which he cannot acquire alone are loaned to him by Genet's submission and respect. On the basis of this, the fake tough will become the sovereign power who must justify his slave.

A strange respect that envelops its own negation, since it knows that it is the creator of the respectable object. In submitting, Genet is not unaware that he becomes an accomplice of an imposture. In fact, it is in order to be its accomplice that he submits. Is he putting on an act? Yes and no. His obedience is *real* since he really and truly fulfills his mission, since he runs real risks in order to carry out the beloved's orders. But, on the other hand, it is *imaginary* because he submits only to a creature of his mind. We find here the equivalent of Pascal's advice: "Kneel and you will believe." Stilitano's sovereign power is the only valid explanation of Genet's acts. And he performs these acts only for the explanation which they require. But at the same time he cannot prevent himself from knowing that he is acting freely and that his thralldom is a deliberate resignation. In fact, his pride requires that in every circumstance he retain consciousness of his freedom. We are back at the paradox which, as we saw above, was the original and deep-seated structure of Genet's sensibility: one cannot distinguish what he feels from what he plays at feeling. In this *true* submission to a sham, is it the submission which communicates its truth to the appearance or the appearance which infects the submission with its falseness? Both, for Genet wants both. He wants his crushed, emptied, inessential consciousness to be only a lamp whose one function is to light up the beauty alone, the glory alone, of the beloved. But in depriving the latter of his soul, he also wants this beautiful image to be the pure means which he is using to make contact with himself, in short, an inessential mediation between Genet and Genet. And since, as we have seen, abjection is an ascesis, an *epoche,* the consciousness that wants to alienate itself finds itself one and alone, confronting the appearance as a consciousness of wanting to alienate itself. The willed, actual contradiction is expressed in two sentences from *Our Lady of the Flowers:* "The Eternal passed by in the form of a Pimp" and "God was hollow." In the first, the pimp represents the heartbreaking and eternal Beauty of a pitiless God. In the second, God collapses. Beauty, Impenetrability and Toughness collapse with him: they were hollow. Genet's essentialism brings him back to his pure power of existing.

He paralyzed his Masters in order to relieve them of their con-

sciousness. In bewitching himself with their beauty, he has gently seduced them, he leads them to cease to exist except in terms of their *gestures,* to bewitch themselves with their own appearance. If Darling and Our Lady are ruined by Divine, it is because they live with her in the worship of the image of them which she has created. And when the handsome, bamboozled pimps are reduced to the state of aesthetic fantasies, then, brusquely, Genet the traitor pulls himself together, disenchants himself and asserts himself as a poetic consciousness in the presence of these emptied carcasses. We have already seen, before the broken mirror, Being, by its very impossibility, reflect to Doing: Genet's hostile eroticism reproduces this conjuring trick; but this time it is the Other which is shattered.

Is Genet satisfied? Certainly not. His hatred triumphs, but in him hatred is a subordinate feeling. At bottom, this dissolution of the beloved represents a further failure. The whole dialectic which referred us from the self-executioner to the mirror, from the mirror to the beloved, from the beloved to the lover, was, fundamentally, only the succession of the figures assumed by his fierce will to become *for himself* the Other that he was for others. Lastly, if he bewitched himself with the Beloved, if he wanted to live in symbiosis with him, it was in order to annihilate himself as *himself* for the benefit of an Other-Self. And so now his corrosive pride has restored to him his integrity as a *person* by reducing the Other to being merely a fantasy, a creation of the mind. But it was precisely the opposite that he was seeking. So Genet has to recognize his series of reverses: I cannot grasp myself as an object; I cannot enjoy the object which I am for the Other; I cannot identify myself with the object that the Other is for me. Is he going to give up? Not yet. How could he do so before delivering himself from the malediction that weighs on him? He must meet *his* Being-Other face to face, either to claim it proudly or to dissolve it and free himself from it. When all is said and done, this long circumnavigation has brought us back to our starting point.

Not quite, however, for the homosexual attempt can be regarded, despite everything, as an effort to enter into communication with other men. Until then, he was alone before a gaze which he was unable to return. A dazzling spotlight transpierced him with its beams and he was too busy struggling in that shaft of light to bother about others. However proud his solitude might have been, it could have passed for ignorance. But it finally occurs to him to turn to the vague shadows surrounding him and ask them for help. He makes an effort to love, to get out of himself, to say You and

We. He makes an actual attempt, he has companions, accomplices, tyrants. To be sure, in order for the experience of love to have been valid, he should not have begun by eliminating the consciousness of those he loved. He was unable to keep from doing so, because the consciousness of others horrified him. If there is a consciousness, before long there will be a judge. He refuses to understand what goes on in people's hearts. Not that he does not have a very fine sense of the workings of the soul, but that these workings fill him with terror. Even at the present time, now that he is a triumphant hero and is made much of by middle-class society, he hastens to please in order to disarm, and if he suspects that his charm has not worked, if he senses that there is a spot of freedom in the other person's eyes, he gets worried and irritated. He dislikes anyone's criticizing his works, not so much out of pride as out of confusion in the presence of an intelligence which he thought submissive and which suddenly reveals its independence. Whatever mistakes I may make about him, I am sure that I know him better than he knows me, because I have a passion for understanding men and he a passion for not knowing them. Ever since our first meeting, I have no recollection of our having spoken of anything other than him. That suits both of us. Of course, the result of his first contact with others was his being cast into solitude. He found everywhere only empty shells, corpses, abandoned houses.

But this new solitude is deliberate, it has been pondered, it is based on experience of the world and on the failure of love. He has got out of himself, he has gone toward his fellow man and encountered only appearances. He now returns to himself. He is alone beneath the fixed light which has not ceased to traverse him.

# I IS ANOTHER

Twice dead the Toughs, the Murderers, the handsome, criminal Pimps. Dead the appearances, dissolved in his acid lucidity. He finds himself free. What then? Free *to do what?* Is he any less wretched? When he discovers this freedom, he is in prison, or begging in Barcelona, crushed by contempt. He has nothing to do with this inner autonomy which can change nothing and which casts him into the most frightful solitude. Until then, he fought against all, he could say: "I alone, and that's enough." But he no longer has the strength to continue the struggle. He must receive encouragement, regardless of whence it comes. Suddenly he glimpses salvation: since the alternating voices of the just and of the criminal constantly repeat to him his condemnation, what if he set another judge against them? Since he is, in the depths of his soul, a man who is being watched, what if he called another gaze to his rescue? Since he is an outcast, what if he transformed himself into one of the elect?

Thus, at a certain stage of the "delirium of influence," when for years the sick man has been hearing furious voices whispering threats in his ears, suddenly a new voice arises amidst the tumult to comfort him: "Don't believe them. You're a Saint, a martyr. Don't be afraid of them. I'm here." He relaxes, abandons himself. At last a bit of love and pity! But the guardian angel is only an envoy of the devil. His appearance marks a new and more advanced phase of mental disintegration: madness is approaching.

So Genet changes witnesses. This is a new reversal. Thus far, he has been trying to see himself through the gaze of Others. His consciousness was an eye which peered into the semidarkness in an

attempt to perceive Genet *as an object.* He now resigns himself to never being an object for himself, provided that he be an object in the eyes of an absolute and benevolent witness. This means that he wants to be Genet in the eyes of a God of love. In a highly structured group, God is, for each member, the Other, the absolute and infinite Other who legitimates tradition, customs and law. He is the foundation and guarantee of order and social imperatives; he completes the integration of the individual into the community; he acts as a factor of *normalization.* But if, as a result of the operation of centrifugal forces, an individual is expelled from the group, the idea of God runs amok within him. In some cases, it is resorbed slowly, in the course of a lifetime, as with Gide, leaving a sacred residue, the word God, which alters all of language. But, in most cases, the idea, cut off from its living roots, becomes abstract; it remains a kind of resort for the lonely man against the society which has exiled him: it is an abstract Society which the Pariah uses as a Countersociety. But it suffers from this new use, it wilts, grows pale, is transformed in accordance with situations and needs. God was the Judge; he becomes the Justification. When this factor of normalization is used against the community's customs and imperatives, it completes, rather, the perversion of the elect.

Driven from his village, Genet thinks he is carrying away with him the Christian God to whom he prayed with the other boys and girls. But his religious notions are already tainted. He had decided to be wrong and to counterbalance universal contempt by the weight of his will alone. He now places on his side a supreme power which all at once tips the balance. But actually this power does not exist: God's power is, for the integrated faithful, the collective power. Genet, who has been disintegrated and expelled, attempts to turn against Society the mythical image of this society itself. Evil has ceased to be the impossible goal of a freedom strained to the breaking point: it is an absolute value which comes from on high. It resembles Good in every respect. Conceived as an *imperative,* it becomes the commandment of the Person who embodies the collectivity and who gathers unto himself all the collective powers. And the child, more exigent than Abraham, asks for a sign, a mark of favor. Earlier, it sufficed for him to will Evil. He now asks to be *him who has the right to will it.* In short, he demands, against society, a kind of *social investiture:* if he is to continue his undertaking, let a notice from on high manifest to him that he is a *sacred object* to celestial eyes. He will not thereby escape the paradox that characterizes him, for in order to encounter a sign one must first

decide that one will encounter it, and when one discovers it, one finds only what one has put into it. Once again, Genet is obliged to *will* what he would like to *receive*. But there is a particular aspect of his condition which is going to enable him to convince himself without too much difficulty that he has *encountered* the mark of his election.

He is eighteen years old, perhaps twenty. He roams all over Europe, he begs, he prostitutes himself, he comes to know the prisons of Poland, of Czechoslovakia, the low quarters of Amsterdam and Barcelona, the Courts of Miracles of all countries. Poverty, filth, vermin, blows, hunger, cold, contempt, nothing is spared him. But he has already decided to be proud. No doubt he first had to be guilty: "Pride comes afterward." But when it comes, everything gives pain. Pride is thorough, it goes into detail, it infects wounds; the universe thereby acquires a deplorable richness. "It is to be noted further that Culafroy and Divine, with their delicate tastes . . . have *always* found themselves in situations repulsive to them." I think, rather, that the delicate tastes were not given at first and that Genet gained in refinement as a result of inspecting his sensations with the aim of finding concrete proofs of his abjection. Pride is a forward-looking vigilance: in order to retain a semblance of initiative in a situation where everything is imposed, this sentiment foresees affronts long in advance, applies itself to discovering the germs of them before they have developed, anticipates abuse, provokes it and puts itself in a state of grace to receive it, tears off dressings, enlarges the wounds so that it itself is the cause of the increase in unhappiness. It descends into the sense of smell in order to sniff the scents of shame; it is an anxiety of the nostrils and the tongue; it tingles at the fingertips; it contrives ever more exquisite, ever more penetrating humiliations. It is Genet's distastes that have formed his taste.

Genet, who is already in a state of almost unbearable unhappiness, is so afraid of being caught napping, of being turned around and invaded, that he is bent on foreseeing the worst. To foresee here is to beget: attention develops and is thoroughgoing. Every pinprick becomes a stab. Consequently, everything takes on meaning, intentions are revealed everywhere: the lice in his hair have been put there by someone; the cold that nips him is not the contingent and immediate relationship of the universe to his body but the calculated effect of a death sentence, the reverse of warm clothing, of the stove that is denied him. While Nature was being humanized for the others, an inhuman Nature was being manufactured for his

use. He was excluded by the same decree from both Society and the Universe, and the moral rigor of the one finds its permanent symbol in the physical rigor of the other. If he suffered only in his flesh, it would not matter; the horror lies in the fact that his judges have re-created winter for him alone, and out of special consideration. Thus, the sequence of physical phenomena manifests the sustained plan to persecute him. The order of things expresses the order of ends, the anonymous indifference of the elements whispers the name Genet. Astonishing ecstasy: everything points to him, the world is a torture machine designed for him alone, the storm which is gathering over the Atlantic has no other aim than to produce clouds which will drench him to the bone. Winter becomes the seasonal sign of his vocation. But since he has decided to live the impossibility of living, every misfortune is an opportunity which lays this impossibility before his eyes and obliges him to decide, once again, not to die. He is tested, he is tempted, he is forbidden any abandon, any hope, he is made to maintain, without a moment's respite, an inhuman tension. Whatever the misfortune it may forecast, his expectation is never disappointed. He can count on the fact that the most unbearable suffering is only a message, a friendly sign for him to be patient, the promise of an even more unbearable suffering. He feels he is being cajoled by a reverse providence. He prophesies infallibly: the first time that little Culafroy is put into prison, he discerns in his fright the presentiment of a worse horror. He is gratified: his cellmate "pulled back the covers daintily . . . he had a wooden leg." Culafroy has always been terrified by cripples. This apparition exceeds his hope; he recognizes in it the hand of God. And yet, nothing can be more necessary: the prison contains monsters; since he has been thrown into it, it is inevitable that he live in a state of promiscuity with the underground race. But it is precisely the double determination of this meeting—by the freedom of the ends and by the necessity of the causes—that plunges Culafroy into an extraordinary rapture: "And the miracle, that catastrophe of horror, horrifying as an angel, blazed forth, though radiant as the solution of a mathematical problem, frighteningly exact."

The miracle is that there is no miracle. It is not the momentary suspension of the course of the world. Quite the contrary, it is that "the order of the world appears perfect in its inevitability" and that it is, for Genet and for Genet alone, without a single exception, without a lapse, utterly unbearable. Genet's theodicy is the opposite of that of Leibniz: he believes in God (we shall see in what God)

because *for him alone* the world is the worst of possible worlds. That is why he cannot be accused of contradicting himself when, after almost praying for the resurrection of a dead friend, he rejects this temptation: "I don't want miracles!" No, indeed, he has nothing to do with those white miracles which suspend the course of nature in order to fulfill a wish and to calm suffering. He wants no exception in his favor, for the good reason that he himself is the exception. By a further paradox, the miracle would merely send him back to share in the common lot: the most miserable creatures have known, if only for an instant, the smile of fortune. Tormented unremittingly by a providence that merges with the necessity of the universe, Genet is the object of the only miracle he tolerates: the black miracle which designates him in his own eyes as one of the elect: "Envisaging the external world, its indefiniteness, its confusion, which is even more perfect at night, I set it up as a divinity of which I was not only the cherished pretext, an object of great care and caution, chosen and led in masterly fashion, though through painful and exhausting ordeals, to the verge of despair, but also the sole object of all this labor."

Thus, Genet is of the elect. He wants only one proof of this, only one sign: the universe. He is elected to suffer, to hate himself and to do evil. In a certain sense, this is not untrue. However, his election comes from the society of decent people. The error is to attribute it to a metaphysical being. A passage in *Our Lady of the Flowers* will enable us to grasp concretely this substitution of elector. In a moment of proud gaiety, little Culafroy, who is in a public park, "about-faces smartly. He was about to begin a dance. . . ." In short, for once he forgets himself, he yields to the temptation of gracefulness, to the appeal of elegance. The torn sole of his shoe stops his pirouette and brings him down to earth again:

"He sauntered back slowly. The strollers in the park watched him go by. Culafroy saw that they noticed his paleness, his thinness, his lowered eyelids. . . . He bowed his head more deeply . . . and whispered aloud a cry, 'Lord, I am among thy elect.' For a few steps, God carried him off to his throne."

An accident of his wretchedness prevents him from performing the luxurious little movement which would have made of him, for a moment, a lord in high heels. Immediately he reverts to humility. He recognizes the immutable severity of the world and the fact that he is not meant for fine whims. At the same moment, he feels upon him the contempt of the Others, their pity. For us, the circle closes: the Others have put him into this intolerable situation, he recog-

nizes his abjection in their gaze, and they, satisfied, contemplate their work. But, for Genet, there is a resort: he escapes. Gazed upon by the crowd, he frees himself by invoking another gaze. Nothing has changed: the torn sole, the ragged clothes, the sickly pallor, the thinness, everything is there; it is *the object Genet.* But, by an imperceptible displacement, Genet makes himself an object for an invisible gaze which touches him like a magic wand and endows his wretchedness with a sacred dimension.

In short, the mechanism is simple: Genet has had a religious upbringing, society has left its mark on him, that is, it has impressed upon him, like a seal, the idea of God, who is the mythical basis of the collective imperatives. And in point of fact it is indeed God who legitimates, *for the Just,* that is, for those who are "integrated," the sentence of exile which they impose on the thief: God forbids theft. Genet, in flight, carries off with him the idea of God. This means that two notions are available to him for pondering the collective, that of Society and that of Divine Person. But the two concepts have a single object. Genet will therefore give two simultaneous interpretations of the same fact: his exile is the consequence of merciless social justice and, at the same time, of divine kindness. And the secret of Providence is none other than the secret of the Group, but *in reverse.* Genet and M. Mauriac are in agreement: God was aiming at Genet through social condemnation. Let us go further: for both of them, this condemnation must have moral consequences. It must *purify.* And when they say God, both of them are actually naming Society as a concrete totality of the Others. But M. Mauriac says condemnation where Genet says election; he recognizes that Genet has defied God when Genet thinks that God has provoked him. He regards purification as a progressive return to the Good, and Genet believes that the torments will make of him an utterly pure evildoer. In short, Genet steals the name that the sacred society gives itself and turns it against the secular society.

It remains to be seen in what form this God, whose gaze transfigures him, appears to him. If he is the Almighty, Genet is done for. For God can opt only for the Good. If Genet is elected by God the Father, he becomes an innocent victim whose sufferings and pitifulness deserve heaven. He departs forever from the evil path which he has chosen and which, if followed to the very end, should lead him to salvation. He does not stop stealing, since he has to steal in order to live. But he sinks into sanctimoniousness with his faking, his insincerity, his false justifications. He acquires a good conscience in a roundabout way, since the order of Evil on earth seems to him

only the reverse side of the heavenly order of Good. And if it appears that the Eternal can order a crime, it is because the religious life is situated above the moral life. So Genet becomes Abraham: Abraham, too, was asked by an Angel to commit a murder.

Fortunately, he no longer quite believes in God. By the time Culafroy is carried off to a heavenly throne, an unpunished sacrilege has long since revealed to him that "the Eternal was hollow." Genet plays at belief as he does at other feelings: it is constantly oscillating between different levels, from a veiled atheism to Black Mass and sacrilege. It is not so much that he *doubts* or that he has lost his faith as a result of clear thinking. No, but what has happened to him is what happens in all cases of ostracism: for a true believer, who is an obedient member of the group and of the Church, divine *transcendence* is guaranteed by that of institutions and customs; the Other is outside; for those who are excluded, God falls into immanence. This transcendent God remains in the group, and the God they take away with them is diluted in their inner life for want of being supported by a church.

The God of Genet is Genet himself. By a stroke of genius he inverts his project radically. The others had convinced him that he harbored within himself a pernicious nature, an evil will. He sought for years to perceive it, he even tried, though in vain, to put his conscious freedom at the source of this nature. In short, he wanted to make an object of it. He now changes his line of attack: he makes himself an object for it. He resigns himself to never seeing it, provided he is conscious of being seen by it. This demoniacal postulation toward Evil expresses his will, his absolute freedom which has flung itself into an irremediable commitment. But it is his will as Other. It is still a nature, but a nature-making nature, and it is Genet's clear consciousness which becomes a nature-made nature. He makes of the propensity for evil which the decent people discern in him a nontemporal choice of doing evil. Beyond heredity, instincts, all forms of passivity, a Kantian noumenal freedom has decided, in an intelligible world, in favor of radical evil. Does this mean that there are two Genets? No, not quite. The "empirical" little thief is closely united to this pure will by the gaze it directs upon him. He feels himself to be a reflected consciousness with respect to a reflective consciousness, with one difference, to wit, that the reflective consciousness is in heaven, out of reach. But it sees him, it guides and approves him. The decisions he makes from day to day are only the coin of the great fixed and eternal choice which constitutes him to the depths of his being. Thus, by a sudden

reversal, consciousness becomes an object, and the imperceptible object of consciousness assumes the rank of an absolute subject which watches him. Of course, this is achieved at the cost of a further effort: it involves becoming a *consciousness watched from behind.* Before the transpiercing gazes of the just, he must feel himself fleeing toward himself from behind himself; he must play, must mime, until he feels a kind of inner flowing.

"Much solitude had forced me to become my own companion . . . and little by little, through a kind of operation which I cannot quite describe, without modifying the dimensions of my body, and perhaps because it was easier to contain so precious a reason for such glory, it was within me that I established this divinity—origin and disposition of myself. I swallowed it. I dedicated to it songs of my own invention. At night I would whistle. The melody was a religious one. It was slow. Its rhythm was somewhat heavy. I thought that I was thereby entering into communication with God: which is what happened, God being only the hope and fervor contained in my song."

Is this change so surprising? For right-thinking people, Genet embodies the Other. And as he has fallen into their trap, he embodies the Other in his own eyes too. But this Other, who has been installed within him by a decree of society, is first *a collective representation,* of which it has all the characteristics. Fixed and intangible, it cannot be reduced to the contingent movements of an individual consciousness. It is Genet himself, but *with another nature.* It is *sacred* Genet haunting the everyday soul of profane Genet. It is actually like the zars which "possess" certain natives of Ethiopia and which are none other than the possessed themselves, but objectified and rendered sacred. And Genet does what the Ethiopians do: he worships his zar. But since this Sacred Ego is the product of the gazes of all, how could it not reflect these gazes upon its worshiper? Thus, without his suspecting it, once again the gazes of all converge upon Genet through this Dark Power which he reveres. Only, those thousands of eyes are internalized. They have gone behind him. The hatred they express has changed into a terrible love, and the punishments to which they have condemned him now become providential ordeals. A close correspondence is established between the course of the world and this intelligible character. The particular categorical imperative that Genet is for himself is expressed both by the impulses which flash through his consciousness and by the tests, the temptations, offered him by the outer world. Or, if one prefers, the entire world, in its indissoluble

unity as a torture machine, is the material image of the sacred subject. Both of them, like Spinozistic thought and extension, are only the two attributes of one and the same substance. In making a choice of his intelligible character Genet *has elected himself* in his empirical reality, and the martyrdom to which the world subjects him is the evident sign, the chief effect, of this election. That is what I call Genet's solipsistic temptation, for a consciousness which contented itself with being a consciousness of self could not fall into solipsism precisely because the world is immediately given as *that which is not made for us.* In order for a consciousness to adopt this attitude, it must already be possessed by the Other and must have endowed this Other with substantiality to the detriment of the world and of itself. A solipsist is a man who denies his empirical existence for the benefit of his noumenal and sacred existence. For the solipsist and for Genet, *I is Another* and this Other is God.

This curious companion whom Genet has given himself has inherited from God his sacred powers (he *is* the Sacred "in person") and from Genet his finiteness. He is, of course, an interlocutor: Genet is constantly talking to him and calling him to witness. This kind of dissociation of the personality is not rare among solitaries.* But the essential function of this Power is to transform Genet's individual history, as it unfolds, into sacred history, that is, as we shall see, to destroy its historicity.

We have accompanied Genet to the ultimate stage of his attempt to find his being through the mediation of others. We can now indicate its dialectical movement.

At the outset, it is a strict intention of achieving as quickly as possible and by every available means the total alienation of his person. In the will to *do,* which we shall examine presently, the structure of the act itself imposes a moment of autonomy: action wants to change the world, to impose upon it a status which does not yet exist; it frees itself from being by nonbeing, since it envisages that which is in the light of that which is not yet. Freedom must therefore be posed for its own sake, even if only to be denied immediately thereafter. But the cruder, more magical project of requesting his being of Others severely proscribes this moment of freedom. In a movement of despair, in a narcissism of horror, Genet

* Although it generally takes place in the opposite direction, where consciousness takes *for object* the object that one is for others: "I said to myself, 'My boy, you're going to get into trouble.' "

seeks to deny himself in servitude: he submits to a sacred object which represents his own nature visible in the guise of Another. He worships, he melts into ecstasy. The first moment of the dialectical progression is thus alienation. Genet is himself *in Another;* his consciousness poses the being of the Other as essential and regards itself as inessential: this is Love. Strictly speaking, in order to be able to decide as to what will be the essential and what the inessential, consciousness must already be conscious of being sovereign, therefore essential. In other words, Genet must *decide* upon his servitude. But this sovereign consciousness is not an object to itself; it is aware of its sovereignty only through a kind of secret knowledge.* Genet is in a good position to ignore it: he bewitches himself in the Other and flees his own consciousness of self. In this first moment, consciousness flees itself and throws itself upon the Other; it tries to be external to itself. It is pure consciousness *of* the Other.

But in order for consciousness to be able to be absorbed completely in its servile function, which is to reflect the merits of the Other, it must deny all consciousness of itself in the Other. If the pure object is actually conscious of itself, it becomes an object for itself and has no need to receive lighting from without; it decides, as subject, on its own truth, and Genet becomes an object in turn. He therefore resolves not to allow the Other to have being-for-itself so that the latter may have being only through the light which is shed upon it. In fact, he disqualifies the other consciousnesses, which might aspire, like his, to reflect the object. He chooses the most feared, most hated man in order to worship him as a god, feeling sure that he is alone in perceiving the god's secret virtues. Thus, the beauty and kindness of Armand, a repulsive brute, exist only in and through Genet's idolatry. Thereupon, the classical reversal takes place: the inessential becomes the essential and the essential the inessential. Armand's being no longer exists except in itself, that is, for that single, privileged Other who is Genet. The Other was to have served as mediator between Genet and his being; it is now Genet who is a mediator between the criminal and the criminal's being. The pimps, the toughs, the murderers, are reduced to simple appearances; they have existence only insofar as Genet's consciousness gives it to them. Consciousness, now liberated, reenters itself; it can no longer conceal from itself, even if it performs acrobatics of dishonesty, the fact that it itself creates these phan-

* The words "aware of" and "know" are inappropriate. It is a matter of what I have elsewhere called "nonthetic consciousness of self."

tasmagoria. Thus, the second moment of the process vigorously contradicts Genet's primary intention. He wanted to become an object and finds himself a subject despite himself. Despite himself? Not quite. Indeed, insofar as his love of the Male included hatred, Genet always had a foreboding of this reversal and even desired it. He would never have accepted servitude if he had not secretly felt sure that he could break free.

Can it be that he has finally freed himself of his chains? No. No doubt he is a free will that makes contact with itself while the appearance sinks. But this will connects with itself as a free will to subject itself. It has freed itself of its fascination in the presence of the Other, but it returns to itself to find its basic choice, which is to sacrifice itself to being. Having looked back on itself, it apprehends itself by a reflective act which is already vitiated by the intention of going over to being. This reflection grows anxious when confronted with the emptiness of consciousness, when confronted with its freedom. Genet is afraid of suddenly discovering that he is master of Good and Evil. Subjected in childhood to the ethics of Good, submissive, thereafter, to the orders of the Big Shots, he is suddenly scared of "becoming his own heaven." In order to avoid this shocking possibility, he is going to rush once again into fatality. In short, he cannot free himself so long as he will not make liberation his goal, but in order to do this he would have to be already liberated; otherwise, the encountering of freedom can only be accidental. This is the classic pattern of all types of discursive madness: the patient is constantly on the brink of lucidity only to start raving again immediately. "I have a chronic hallucinatory psychosis," said a psychiatrist. And he diagnosed his case quite pertinently, only to add immediately thereafter: "It's my confrere So-and-So who gave it to me." Thus, Genet's frightened consciousness once again desires to be inessential, but this time it is going to estrange itself from itself. It is going to lure the Big Shot who gives orders, and incorporate him into itself. Thus far, Genet's wicked Nature was little more than a kind of opacity, a jumbled heap of fatality. It was situated at the back of Genet's consciousness like a naïve image of the unconscious, a pure object which had not found its subject. The terms are now reversed. This constituted "essence" or "nature" becomes a constituting subject. He hands over to it his own freedom, his lucidity; it becomes the Demon at the back of his head; it sees him, and this omnipotent gaze impastes his consciousness with a secret objectivity. This consciousness, now chilled by a foreign gaze, loses its freedom, its autonomy: it retains a modicum of reality

only insofar as it is the object of this new gaze. To think, to speak, to feel, are henceforth to worship this Demon, which is oneself, or to offer words as sacrifice in propitiatory ceremonies; all is a religious gift, all is worship. Thus, the liberation was only a moment in the dialectical process, only the transition from one alienation to another. Is it possible to will oneself, at the same time and in the same connection, as a pure object and as an absolute subject? But the moment of alienation proves insufficient in turn: this invisible God is too abstract; Genet's subjection is too deliberate, it has not the violence of the desires that stagger him and throw him at the feet of good-looking roughnecks. Thus, the dialectical progression which I have just indicated deviates into a circular movement: subjection to the Other, return to self, subjection to self as other, return to amorous subjection, etc. Genet looks at himself, despairs of making contact with himself, goes to give himself to a tough, secretly debunks him, leaves him, magnifies his adventures without ceasing to take them for what they are worth, is disgusted by the poetic failure and comes back to look at himself and to make love. He goes round in circles, he can keep his balance only by moving faster and faster, going from one pimp to another pimp, from one embrace to another embrace, from essence to existence and from existence to essence, from poetic glorification to corrosive lucidity. If he stops, he is dead. Is he fleeing his original malediction or is he pursuing his being? Both at the same time.

Yet there is another way: during all this time, he steals, lies, betrays. Will he make contact with himself at least by what he *does*? Or is this new path only a new circuit which he will have to travel without respite? We must go back to evil will and follow Genet on the paths of Evil.

## A DAILY LABOR, LONG AND DISAPPOINTING...

Let us go back to the moment of the conversion. The child has decided both to *be* evil and *do* Evil. We have followed him in the labyrinth where he is misled by his will to be. Will he have better luck when he aims only at acting? One would think so at first: does he not discard the contradictions of ontological and theological morals in order to grapple with an ethic of action?

Yes, he does: in deciding to act, Genet connects with himself at the source of his freedom, in his pure and formal possibility of willing. For this unconditioned will, all particular and material ends are equivalent. Wealth can help or corrupt, depending on the case; thus, it is neither good nor evil in itself; all depends on the use to which it is put. An unconditionally evil will will deign to procure it only if it is the best *means* of doing evil. Genet recognizes only one end: Evil, consciousness in Evil. The quest for being began with a will to total subservience to the Other, that is, to the world, to Being itself, and although Genet raised himself from that state to one of passing autonomy, he did so in spite of himself. He had no rest until he hurried back into servitude again. On the other hand, evil will starts by willing itself as a primary and inexcusable cause: thus, the first moment of this new dialectic is that of freedom; we shall see Genet rising from being to *existence*. Let us say that the quest for being reveals the magical and religious aspect of this consciousness: it goes round in circles, it eats and is eaten, it exhausts itself in a cannibal ritual. The pure will to Evil, on the other hand, represents spirituality. The mind, which has been freed, here makes contact with itself, gives itself rules, confers upon the world its status.

And yet we have left the aporias of Being only to fall into those of Nonbeing. Let us not think that it is easy to do evil or even to know what Evil is. It was a lotion for external use: Genet swallows it; the result is a generalized poisoning. We have, in fact, seen that the Society of decent folk has manufactured this shaky concept for the express purpose of projecting it on others. Evil is what my enemy does; it is *never* what I do myself. We have recognized in it the negative part of our freedom which we pluck from ourselves in order to throw it, like the robe of Nessus, on an ethnic or religious minority. Thus, evil is, in its principle, evil-object. If any right-thinking man tried to introduce it into himself, this unstable mixture would be diluted in his subjectivity. But when one of the scapegoats whom Society has chosen and whose only task is to commit a few crimes in a state of debasement and to let himself be carted from prison to prison amidst the jeers of the mob, when one of these helots happens to be intelligent, willful, sensitive and pious, when he takes his role seriously and tries to live within himself in accordance with the principles that are imposed upon him from without, in short, when he endeavors to fulfill, in and by his subjectivity, a notion which has meaning only in the objective, he then finds himself confronted with endless contradictions and becomes himself contradictory, for he must install in his consciousness —and must assume—all the divergent characteristics which the respectable man has thrown pell-mell into this catchall concept. Because the evildoer is the *absolute Other,* we have seen Genet attempt to fulfill his Ego as the Other-than-self and drift into narcissism and then into homosexuality. But when he wants to *do* evil, he is no better off: order and disorder, relative and absolute, Being of Nonbeing and Nonbeing of Being, principle and person, such is the end he must achieve in the World. Can he even *conceive* it? Can he focus on the various characteristics of Evil at the same time?

If one wants, on every occasion, to do the worst, one must have a special sensibility in order to discern it: one must be "sensitized" to evil, must have, in general and in each particular case, a clear and distinct idea of it. There are people who say of themselves that they "never see Evil," and that is true. Not that they are better than others. Quite the contrary. But as they have a sweeping view of Good, they see Evil sweepingly, without going into detail. In order to be evil, one needs experience, shrewdness, a subtle knowledge of the heart; one must be able to sense unfailingly the word that will hurt most, to invent the act that wounds irreparably. But the heart

knows itself through the heart: a person to whom I am indifferent cannot wound me. It is not enough even to know what our victim wants most; we must want it with him, we must sympathize with his desires, we must espouse them. In fact, we must love him; one must love in order to cause suffering. The reader may observe that hatred, too, knows its object. To which I reply: because of the portion of attentive love that it contains. Let us bear in mind the universal tenderness of the child Genet: it is not dead but only disguised, and it is this tenderness that will inspire him to do evil. In short, since Evil is a negation, one cannot discover it unless one first, or at least at the same time, perceives what it denies. Genet's tact, his "sensitization," includes a positive content: sensitization to Good. Thus, knowledge of Evil presupposes that of Good, but the previous intuition of Good cannot be a cold, languid contemplation. Such contemplation would offer us facts, not values. In order to know Good, one must want it. Let the evildoer therefore know, love and want Good, let him not cease for an instant to want it and love it, even in the depths of vice. The more distinct the knowledge and the stronger the will, the more criminal will be his intention of doing evil. Evil will is more complex than good will, just as a second-degree equation is more complex than a first. For good will wants Good without any other presupposition, and though it too may sometimes have to overcome resistance, such resistance is external to it and does not spring from its original intention but from another region of the soul, whereas in order to deny Good the will to Evil must first pose Good and will it. Inversely, evil will must not cease to hate the crime which it plans. The only immediate and universal sign available for recognizing Evil is that it is detestable. Not detestable to this one or that one, but to everyone, hence to the evildoer himself. I shall know unmistakably that an action is evil when the very idea that I might commit it horrifies me. Though it may appear that this horror ought to prevent me from doing evil, such is not the case; it is the horror itself that ought to be my most powerful motive. It may well be that the crime seems to me momentarily to be desirable *in spite* of the horror with which it fills me: for example, if it is the only means of regaining my freedom. A prisoner who escapes may find himself forced to kill a guard. But in that case the aim is not murder but escape. Evil is not the end, it is only the means, and, in the last analysis, one has chosen not the worse but the *lesser evil.* The prisoner deemed that it was better to kill the guard than go back to jail. To be sure, *for the others* this act is a crime. If he is caught, he may be shot. But

*for him* it is an unavoidable accident: he judges that he is in a state of legitimate defense. No: the ideal thing would be that the evil act be gratuitous; Evil is the action that we have no reason to perform and every reason to avoid. And that is just how Genet, in his books, presents the crimes of his heroes. Erik, alone in the countryside, suddenly notices a child playing. The child is charming, confident, he enjoys being alive, he is happy. The sight of him immediately arouses in Erik a feeling of sympathy, in fact a feeling of love. But love immediately awakens the idea of murder in this soul which is involved in evil. The idea first manifests itself in the form of anguish: it would be *awful* to kill the child. Or, if one prefers, if only I'm not seized with a desire to kill him! That is all. No hatred, no sadism, no resentment. The idea takes shape, it is exacerbated, it becomes Erik's greatest terror. With all his heart he wants the child to live, he would like to talk to it, caress it, make it happy; he knows that nothing is more loathsome, nothing more cowardly, than the murder of a child; he already imagines how the little victim would look at him if he aimed his revolver; beads of sweat stand out on his forehead; he rebels completely against this abominable possibility, which is nevertheless *his* possibility. *Precisely because of that,* he will kill. He takes his revolver, slowly; he looks the child in the eyes in order to see his last expression. At that moment there is no telling which of the two is more afraid, which of the two is suffering more. He fires and causes two deaths: one kills in order to kill oneself.

There, at least, we have the *ideal* evil action. I am not inventing anything; neither is Genet. Everything is already contained in the notion of radical Evil concocted by right-thinking people. The Evildoer must will Evil for Evil's sake, and since Good is prior to Evil, as Being is to Nothingness, it is *from his original love of Good* that he must draw the motives for doing evil and *in his loathing of Evil* that he must discover the attraction of Sin. The Evildoer's will must be dual, since it wills Evil in direct relation to its fundamental will to Good, while rigorously preserving its inner unity. This duality is not inconceivable. Indeed, we see in the act of reflection the simultaneous emerging of two consciousnesses which have distinct objects, since the first relates to the world and the second relates to the first: I perceive and I know that I perceive; I act and I watch myself acting; I talk and I listen to myself talking. Is it not precisely on this reflective ground that Genet has condemned himself to dwell forever? Is he not the man who is always spying on himself, judging himself and comparing himself? It would be convenient to

say that the will to Good, which is immediate and unthinking, applies itself to external objects, to the sick person who *must* be taken care of, to the penniless man who *must* be helped, and that the will to Evil, being a knowledge of our first will, operates on the plane of reflectiveness: I would perceive in my heart a desire to aid the afflicted, and my reflective consciousness would immediately check it. Yet reflective scissiparity furnishes only a very rough image of the duality of evil will. It is not enough to will Good and deny it at one and the same time: this might be weakness, surrender. And even if I refuse, *precisely because it is a good deed,* to perform the action suggested to me by my immediate will, that would still be insufficient: I may be yielding to a burst of temper, to a passing fit of misanthropy: "What's the good of helping him? He's just as bad as the others," etc. But that would be merely an abstention. The sight of the Good must arouse the will to harm. Far from helping the poor fellow, I will crush him, and all the more in that he deserves greater sympathy or pity. And that is still not enough: even if I pitilessly violated all prohibitions, even if I thwarted all my spontaneous good intentions, I would not be utterly lost since they exist, since there is still a kind of original goodness in me. The ideal thing would be for me to be good with the express purpose of being evil: not only should reflection contradict the spontaneous intention, but, in addition, a deeper will should produce this first intention with the express purpose of its being contradictory. In short, the impulse to Good should be produced only in a consciousness already polarized toward Evil and as a means of doing the greatest Evil, that is, of also thwarting Good in me.

We have just encountered the first aporia of Evil, a simple internalization of an objective contradiction which was pointed out above. For the Being of Evil is both the Being of Nonbeing and the Nonbeing of Being. It is at one and the same time relative to Good and absolute. Thus, in a sense, the greatest evil is to have an intimate knowledge of Good, to be *born good* like every human creature, and to reject that blinding light, to plunge deliberately into darkness. That is why the fully responsible adult who has acted with premeditation is judged to be necessarily more guilty. From this point of view, Evil arises after Good and relatively to it. But, once again, if Evil is perfect, it must be absolute; therefore, the evildoer must be totally evil; it is still too much that he be good at the beginning. This time, Being appears in order to be destroyed. Goodness is awakened in the evildoer only as an indispensable moment of evildoing, *in order* to be thwarted and trampled on.

How is one to choose? And, in the second case, how is one to ask nothingness to produce being, to ask negation to beget affirmation while remaining negative? Moreover, if the evildoer becomes good in order to make himself worse, how will he be able to be really good, how will he be able *really* to feel that horror of doing evil which is one of the necessary conditions of the evil deed? But if he does not abhor Evil, if he does it out of passion, then, as Genet himself says, Evil becomes a Good. In actual fact, the person who *loves* blood and rape, like the butcher of Hamburg, is a criminal lunatic but not a true evildoer.

We shall see that Genet chooses the first solution. This child who wishes to purify himself through crime will make of Evil the instrument of his own punishment. Moreover, the best way of attaining pure will is to make of crime an ascesis: we know very well that Genet was good. With each of his crimes he will free himself a little more from his past, from his tastes, from his gentleness. His freedom will assert itself *against his sensibility*. But the second solution cannot be dismissed so easily. In a sense, one solution cannot be chosen without the other. Its invisible presence will blight all of Genet's fine reasoning.

But here we have a further aporia: since Genet's sensibility is entirely at variance with his undertakings, where will he find a *motive* for doing evil? We have deduced from the nature of Evil that the evildoer derives his reasons for killing from the horror with which the crime inspires him and from his original love of Good. The deduction is correct, but it leads to absurdities, for it amounts to saying that our chief motive in performing a certain category of actions is both our desire not to perform them and our will to perform the contrary action. How is one to find in Good a reason for doing Evil? And in the rejection of Evil? The conversion of Evil to Good is conceivable: evil is disorder and nonbeing; it is possible to find in it reasons for willing being and order. This relative refers us from the self to the absolute. Or, as Catholics say, Sin is the gaping void of God. But what about conversion of Good to Evil? How could one even consider it? Good is Being, Positivity, Order, absolute Plenitude. Where can one find the slightest flaw in it? And Evil, being nothingness, can exist only if it is willed. How could it possess the slightest force of attraction? It does not even pay, since it must horrify us to the very end. Let us imagine a torturer gently questioning his future victim: "What is the torture you dread most, the one that you pray to God every day to spare you?" The victim naïvely replies: "The strappado." The torturer:

"That's the very one I'm going to inflict on you." The same holds for the evildoer in relation to himself. Since the subjective criterion of Evil is the horror it inspires, the evildoer knows that the greatest Evil is also that which will pain him most. After deliberately betraying a friend, Genet declares: "My betrayal causes me unspeakable suffering." The very excess of the contradiction gives the statement a slightly comic overtone that should arouse our mistrust. Be that as it may, is it an appetite for suffering that inclines him to Evil? But Genet's attitude remains quite ambiguous: let us bear in mind that he wants to go to crime *despite* this suffering and not *because* of it. Indeed, it resists him, it prevents him from establishing himself at once in the depths of Evil. He has to train himself, has to use the latest misdeeds he has committed as a springboard for even more detestable inventions. "Evil," he writes, "is achieved little by little, through a discovery of genius which makes you drift far away from men. But most often by a daily labor, long and disappointing." He even apologizes: "I had to rely on a bit of physical beauty to attain Evil." As if the horror were such that he could not attain it without help, somewhat as Dante needs Vergil's arm to descend to Hell. There is progress in Evil, and it is by constant training that the resistances are, one by one, broken down and that one achieves the progressive racking of the will. But here is the immediate counterpart: one must not, under any circumstance, eliminate, or even reduce, suffering. The ideal thing would be even to increase it: one should train oneself and not harden oneself. Genet writes: "That inhuman life might too quickly have led Erik to detachment." During a scene of sadism, the torturers scowl, and he says: "I knew that they had to indulge in scowls because their contempt was in danger of becoming an indifference to Evil to the point of pity for those who commit it." He thus wants to install himself at the very heart of the contradiction. The subjective aspect of Evil is a suffering to the very marrow, a contempt for oneself and one's accomplices which under no circumstances must change to pity. Genet deliberately wants the downfall within consciousness, in short what Bataille would call *torment.*

> I am the wound and the knife . . .
> The victim and the hangman.*

Is this, then, his goal?

The fact remains that if Genet wants to be self-caused he must

* Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal,* "L'Héautontimorouménos."—Translator's note.

either get rid of his sufferings or become their perpetrator. And as his original crisis plunged him, despite himself, into a horror of which he cannot be cured, his only way of deriving this horror from himself is to intensify it and carry it to the extreme. What is more, it is only in a state of suffering that he can *feel* free, for suffering is the only feeling that can come from him. Unless one is a god, one cannot make oneself happy without the help of the universe; to make oneself unhappy, one needs only oneself.

But we immediately encounter further difficulties: as a free man, Genet must want to acquire the autonomy of his *sensibility,* but insofar as he wants to be evil, that is, to acquire the autonomy of his *will,* he cannot will Evil merely because of the horror it inspires in him. If torment were the supreme end, it would not differ greatly from the self-inflicted ordeals of the Saint. Or else, quite the contrary, it would become the expression of a deep resentment: tortured and becoming his own torturer, Genet would want to shame respectable people just as Baudelaire becomes the Heautontimoroumenos in order to shame Madame Aupick. And, most certainly, Genet shifts from one attitude to the other: he has not lost the ambition to be a saint and, on the other hand, his rancor is so manifest that Scheler would certainly have included him among the "men of resentment." But the suffering which is caused us by the Evil we do is equidistant from the tortures one inflicts upon oneself out of asceticism and those one imposes upon oneself out of sulkiness. And besides, Genet's pride tries to squelch his rancor: he is not allowed to complain, since one complains *to others* and of the wrongs they do one. Although Genet often strays from his path, he always comes back to it. It is indeed Evil that he wills and that he must will in order to retain the initiative. An exclusively psychoanalytical interpretation of his attitude would beg the question: to be sure, the intelligent solicitude of decent people did its utmost to burden the child with every possible complex. Rancor, feeling of inferiority, overcompensation, Genet has known them all. But we will understand nothing about his case if we are unwilling to recognize that he undertook, with exceptional intelligence and vigor, to carry out his own psychoanalysis. It would be absurd to explain him by impulses when the fact is that it is against these impulses that he wants to regain his autonomy. No doubt at the root of his decision there is what I shall call a psychoanalytical situation. And it is true that Genet does Evil because men and circumstances impel him to. But if that were all, he would be one of the countless victims of our despicable society, he would not be

Jean Genet. Jean Genet is a thief who wanted *to change his motives for stealing* and who thereby transcended his original situation. His astounding effort to regain freedom in Evil deserves therefore to be explained by his object and not by a *vis a tergo,* which, in point of fact, he escapes. Although he may occasionally relapse into resentment, in the manner of very young children who momentarily regress to an earlier stage of their development, nevertheless the fact remains that he invented the willing of Evil for Evil's sake. And not only Evil for its own sake, but Evil in itself. It will not suffice for him to attain the absolute of suffering; he wants to make new and absolutely evil events appear in the universe. And when he is in full possession of himself, at the highest pitch of his inner tension, it is not of the appetite for suffering that he will ask the motive for his evil deeds; he wants them to be the effects of an absolute willing which derives its motivation from itself and not from the world. We return to our starting point and again ask the question: What is the motive for doing evil that can be derived from consideration of the Good? There is only one: the absence of motives. All the others, whatever they may be, have a positive content, and the Good, as an absolute positivity, is the geometric locus of the positive contents of all motives. Thus, every wish, every desire, every passion, contributes to impelling me to Good exactly insofar as it contains a thin vein of the positive and of being. The Good has no need of me. It exists by itself, it is God, it is the social machine. And I, on the other hand, have need of *it.* An irresistible force inclines me to do Good just as the quiet power of the evident obliges me to affirm clear and distinct ideas. This Good is the universal objective which appears to all human beings in the same way. It is what anyone would do in my place, and, consequently, it is that with respect to which I am inessential and undistinguished. In doing Good, I lose myself in Being, I abandon my particularity, I become a universal subject. With respect to the Good, men of good will are interchangeable. They *are,* it is *good* that they are, being is a good, Good is Being. Through them, being goes to Good as the cow goes to the bull. A husband who was on his deathbed thanked the persons about him in the most heartfelt terms; to his wife, who had nursed him unsparingly, he said only: "As for you, I'm not thanking you. You simply did your duty." She did not reply. What could she have answered? The most natural, the easiest thing was to spend her nights at the sick man's bedside. Since she loved him, since she was his wife, she could find within herself no reason for letting him die. She had therefore done what any wife would have

done in her place. She did not reply, but she must, I imagine, have thought to herself what Kafka writes in his journal: "Good is sometimes disheartening." On the other hand, Evil needs me in order to exist. It is all weakness. In fact, it is dizzying only because of its nothingness. It will begin to be only if I think it, it will gain force only if I undertake to achieve it. In short, it is never anything but the exact correlative of my attitude toward it. If I turn away from it, it vanishes. I must constantly support it in its wavering being by a continuous creation. As it is always the exception to the rule, the unique, the instantaneous—just try to make universals of theft, crime and lying!—it reflects, at the same time, my particularity. Hence, there is in the Good which attracts me a motive for my turning away from it, to wit, the fact that it already is, that it is everywhere, that it is as plain as a pikestaff, that it is irresistible and foreseen and that I lose myself in it, forget myself and swoon in a kind of pantheistic ecstasy. And in the Evil which horrifies me there is a motive for attracting me, the fact that it comes from myself and will cease whenever I like and that consequently I cannot lose myself in it. Indeed, I find myself in it, I am never more present to myself than in that grating consciousness of wanting what I do not want. Gide is right in saying that the Devil has won if he convinces me that he does not exist. If he did exist, what would it matter to me? To abandon God in order to follow Satan would be to exchange one mode of being for another. But if nothing is only Being, if being is everywhere, if error is *nothing*, if evil is *nothing*, if everything one may want or conceive or love is also being and, hence, an aspect of Good, then the temptation of Evil begins, that is, freedom tempts itself. The universal subject looks down into the well and sees at the bottom his own image as a negativity, a particularity, a freedom. And furthermore, nonbeing attracts me, or, if one prefers, I attract myself from the depths of nonbeing: as a being, I am encircled and hemmed in by being, God's eye sees me. But since God, the infinite Being, cannot even conceive nothingness, in nothingness I escape him and derive only from myself. Not that I annihilate myself, but in absorbing myself in conceiving nonbeing I am still a consciousness or, if one prefers, a presence of nothingness to itself. This trinity of represented nothingness, or pure appearance, whose *esse* is only a *percipi*, of the reflected-reflecting nothingness and of the reflecting-reflected nothingness (which pair constitutes the nonthetic consciousness of self) has no being other than the consciousness of being, hence no basis, no support outside of self. And, on the other hand, the existence of this consciousness,

which has no outside by which it can be taken, destroyed or modified, confers upon the complete system of nonbeing an absolute *presence.* Who could then dislodge me from my darkness, who could join me there? As a being who thinks about being, I am a creature of God; as a nothingness thinking nothingness, I am my own cause. And no doubt I then produce only appearances. But nothing is more dizzying than appearance, for if I discovered a truth, it would immediately belong to everyone and no longer to me. And if, to suppose the impossible, I created being, this being would continue in its being without me, through inertia or with the help of God. But appearance *is not I;* it steals from being its transcendency, and yet it sticks to the skin of my consciousness as does a cataract to an eye; it depends on me alone. Appearance is satanic, because it caricatures being and because it is all that man can produce by his own means. Hence, evil is the absence of motives suggesting to me that I invent my motives; it is the destruction of being conceived as the creation of appearance. We shall see that this last formula can be rigorously applied to Genet's aesthetic for the reason that Evil is also called, quite simply, the Imaginary. But, it may be argued, is not the *real* Evil the *act* whereby Erik kills the child? No: the criminal is already calling for the aid of Being; he composes, combines and chooses. The moment of absolute Evil is that in which he dreams of killing a child and in which suddenly, without ceasing to be a dream, the imaginary terminates in a decision. Genet's acts are both poems and crimes, because they are dreamt for a long time before being committed and because he still dreams them while committing them. There we have the motive: the hounded child lets himself sink into the absolute solitude of a long, evil dream where no one can follow him.

But let us be cautious: no sooner have we found this motive than we must, in turn, abandon it, in the first place because Genet does not want to remain in the dream, even if, as is the case, it is tougher and sharper than the most realistic calculation. His pride refuses evasion. The entire world will have to *become* his dream, will have to dream for him and with him, will have to reveal its shadowy face. Crime is a means of forcing the world to dream nothingness. In addition, and above all, if we must do Evil *in order to attain* this singular freedom, then once again Evil becomes a means and it is freedom which becomes an end. It is freedom, it is particularity, it is solitude that we are aiming at, and not Evil for its own sake. Genet is not always able to avoid this substitution of ends, as appears from such passages as the following: "His sufferings

are of metaphysical origin. . . . Of his solitude had been born anxiety about the problem of Evil, and he had postulated Evil out of despair." And: "[I thought] that the domains of Evil were less frequented than those of Good and that I would be alone there. . . . My taste for solitude incited me to seek out the most virgin lands." The relationship of Evil to Solitude remains uncertain. In the first quotation, the former is the effect of the latter, and in the second, the means of obtaining it. Both formulas are true: solitude, which at first is undergone, chooses itself and, in so doing, becomes Evil. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Genet goes round in circles: in order to avoid evil-out-of-resentment, which is only sulkiness, he plunges into evil-as-torment, which very soon changes into pure asceticism. In order to escape both, he finally invents the notion of doing Evil gratuitously, but, as a result, it is gratuitousness which becomes his final end because it manifests the solitude of his freedom. Perhaps evil is impossible? Perhaps those who say that "nobody is willfully evil" are right?

And yet, what if that were the solution to the problem? Since the synthesis of the Nonbeing of Being and the Being of Nonbeing is appearance, and since appearance manifests to the evildoer his horrible freedom, what if Genet, by an extraordinary effort, transformed acts into gestures, being into the imaginary, the world into phantasmagoria and himself into an appearance? What if he replaced the impossible destruction of the universe by its *derealization?* What if this boy transformed himself—like Divine—into an imaginary woman? And what if, by means of this make-believe, he drew everything—trees, plants, utensils, animals, women and men —into a derealizing whirl? We shall see later that this mad attempt to replace the entire world by a world of appearance is called the aesthetic and that the aesthete is an evildoer. For ten years of his life Genet was an aesthete, and beauty was at first, for him, only a hate-ridden dream of universal conflagration.

But the child has not yet reached this point. He is stumbling over difficulties of a new order. We have just seen that he has decided to attain Evil by means of a conscious and painful exercise. And, to be sure, this continually increasing torture is the greatest Evil per se. But, if Evil must exist, it must also be *in se.* Can these purely subjective tortures be regarded as the greatest Evil per se? If Genet hurt only himself, he would cut a paltry figure indeed compared to the criminal who, without making such a to-do, slaughtered a whole family. Is there a correspondence between subjective Evil—the thankless efforts, the self-disgust, the suffering—

and objective evil, that which is condemned by Religion and Morality? Is it possible to find a crime that is the worst *in both systems at the same time?*

As a matter of fact, there exist, for a single kind of being, several kinds of nonbeing: several errors for a single truth. And, in a given case, for a single way of being just there are several ways of being unjust. How is one to decide? Genet, who betrays in despair and renounces friendship out of fidelity to Evil, is the exact counterpart of Philoctetes, who renounces hatred and gives away his bow. This means that extreme Evil is modeled on Sovereign Good. It will be defined, like Good, by the austere purity of the intention; it is a will that wills itself unconditionally evil. But there is another way of betraying, to wit, handing over one's friend out of cowardice, out of baseness, out of low envy or quite simply for money. This is obviously another kind of Evil. Which is worse? The first is "Consciousness in Evil," which Baudelaire considered the supreme Evil. But this exquisite consciousness, which, as we have seen, envelops even that of Good, is, in a certain way, itself a Good. Genet recognizes this explicitly when he declares that to kill oneself is the greatest crime because one does away with the mind, by which the entire world, Good and Evil alike, is lit up. Thus, like consciousness *of* Evil, consciousness will be evil; it will be good like consciousness in general. And what about evil will? It is a will to Evil, no doubt, but it is pure, and purity must be considered a good, wherever it lodges.* Similarly, the severe training to which Genet subjects himself in order to attain "little by little" the worst is blameworthy with respect to its object but praiseworthy with respect to its principle: it requires will power, courage, a sense of method, all of which are virtues. A keen sensibility, exceptional intelligence, incomparable firmness of mind, unwearying patience, a deep sense of the human, these are what are required of a prince of Evil. Thereupon he becomes admirable: he is Maldoror or Fantomas. The other Evil is quite simply vile. It is out of ignorance and barbarism that the brute breaks rare objects while looting; it is out of insensitivity and not out of sadism that he lets his victim scream without finishing him off; it is out of coldheartedness that he informs on his friend and his brother for thirty pieces of silver. This evil lacks the elegance and style of the great satanic Evil, but it is truer. One does not meet Fra Diavolo or Mandrin every day, but one is always meeting cowards. Less pure, less systematic and, above all, much more conscious than the other, it barely exists *for*

* "The devil is pure because he wants only Evil" (Maritain).

*itself. In itself,* it is perhaps worse. The first Evil necessitates the human order and, in a certain sense, preserves it. The second destroys it mercilessly: it crushes man and is unaware of him. The brute who tortures out of cowardice, out of insensitivity, is perhaps less guilty, since he does not know what he is doing. He is more terrible. His heart and mind are consumed by darkness. He is stricken with the *Evil of Consciousness* which we contrasted above with *Consciousness in Evil.* Genet is so clearly aware of this opposition that he envies the brute his vileness; he would like to win on both boards, to incur truly the Evil of Consciousness in order then to suffer it as if it were a kind of gangrene. This dream assumes a delicately comic form in *Funeral Rites.* In connection with the betrayal of which we have spoken, he writes: "Refusing to let my gesture be heightened by disinterestedness, to let it be a purely gratuitous act, performed, as it were, for the fun of it, I completed my ignominy. I required that my betrayal be paid for. . . ."

It is glaringly obvious that he is the Prince who asks to be paid, who pretends that he is led by the lure of gain. If Genet can believe for a moment that he has lowered himself to the level of a brute, it is because he has a mystique of the gesture. In putting out his hand to receive the wages of his betrayal, he confers a low and imaginary motive on an act which is thoroughly perverse, but not vile. In fact, each Evil challenges the other: the princely Evil is only a deceptive game, it will never have the dense seriousness of abjection. Inversely, the darkness in which the brute lives can serve as an excuse for Genet: he destroys the human within and around himself, but he thereby situates himself in an actual world on which no value judgment has a hold. He does not *do* Evil, he is a carrier of it as a fly is a carrier of germs. Thus, each refers to the other, and the two would complete each other if only they could correspond to each other. But they are quite distinct, and Genet must go from one to the other with a rapid and constant movement, for each appears to him to be the true Evil when it is the other which he is pursuing—without, be it added, ever attaining one or the other, since he cannot find motives for doing the first and since the second has motives which are foreign to him. Evil, being Other than Being, is always *elsewhere,* always elusive. It is a "marginal hallucination"; it is never in the direct line of vision, it can be seen only out of the corner of the eye. In order to will it, however, he would have to look it in the face. Genet moves his eyes in order to bring it into focus. In vain: at every moment, Evil jumps aside; it always remains at the trembling edge of the eye.

Furthermore, we have not reached the end of our difficulties, for

we have set forth only purely formal determinations of Evil. We still have to define it materially. What is the most criminal Act? Is it that which society will condemn most severely? We are again confronted, in another area, with a question we left unanswered. Besides, no agreement on what is the greatest Good has ever been possible. Is it life? No, since one can risk it for freedom. Then is it freedom? But is freedom above love? And isn't love blind? Must it not be guided by reason? What about happiness? And pleasure? If there is such uncertainty as to the Sovereign Good, then what will there be with respect to the Sovereign Evil? And, in fact, at times Genet decrees that it is crime and at times betrayal; and at times it is no longer either, as in the following curious passage where crime itself engenders life and Good:

"By evil I mean here the sin against social laws or religious laws (of the State religion), whereas Evil really exists only in the fact of causing death or preventing life. Do not try to use this rapid definition as a basis for condemning murder. To kill is often to give life. Killing can be good. This can be recognized by the joyous exaltation of the murderer. It is the joy of the savage who kills for his tribe. Riton is not here to kill, but it doesn't matter. The sin isn't here. He kills in order to live, since these murders are the pretext for and means of a higher life. The only crime would be to destroy oneself, for one thereby kills the only life that matters, that of one's mind."

Here Genet's thinking, which is usually so nimble, bogs down. Or rather it tires itself in playing puss-in-the-corner with Evil. The fact is that, despite himself, a liquidation of his childish beliefs is taking place here and there as he approaches the age at which the adolescent begins to question family values. He sometimes looks at the society about him and does not recognize in the paltry morality of right-thinking people the terrible God of wrath whom he saw gleaming for an instant in the eyes of the villagers who condemned him. Social good, which is compounded of mystification and oppression, and which, in the most favorable cases, does not rise above a rather crude utilitarianism, cannot create, as a by-product, an absolute and metaphysical Evil: the pair would not be homogeneous. The mores define an evil which is on a par with themselves: relative, mediocre, crude. It would not take much for the liquidation which has begun to continue and be completed: then, perhaps, for Genet as for the Greek thief, there would no longer be right or wrong. But no, the shock he received at the age of ten has fixed within him forever the idea of absolute Good, and, though the social content of this Good tends to lose all importance, Genet will

always bear the ineradicable mark of a condemnation issued in the name of a divine morality; he will rebelliously maintain the necessity of willing Evil. Thus, the balance is destroyed, and this time it is the Good which is elusive. Beyond the empirical and utilitarian couple, good-evil, about which he is unconcerned, Genet pursues absolute Evil. But if Evil is in itself and for itself the stubborn, solitary and desperate rejection of Good, where then is he to find a Good up to the mark? At certain times it will quite simply be God himself. Unable to find, in the dupes he despises, the frightful gravity of grownups, Genet will lodge it in an absolute consciousness. "Pride is the boldest freedom: Lucifer lashing out against God." But God himself has lost some of his power; the child now only half-believes in him. *Our Lady of the Flowers* relates how little Culafroy (who is Genet himself) stole up to the altar and secretly committed a sacrilege, a profanation of the host. He thereby tried willfully to reconstitute the original crisis which obsessed him by giving it the dimensions of a religious tragedy. Everything was set up: the church was empty, the child was alone, or pretended to think he was alone, and he committed the inexpiable sin. God was going to appear, His face blazing with wrath, was going to catch him in the act and to manifest by a sign that He condemned him forever. The child was yielding to the double giddiness of carrying his offense to the absolute in order to assure himself that the sentence was beyond appeal and of mastering the event which crucified him by reproducing it on his own initiative and with infinite dimensions. But the miracle did not occur. God proved to be far inferior to men: he remained silent. Whereupon faith collapses: if God is not a God of wrath, if He does not keep the appointment, if He does not reduce the evildoer to dust, it is because He does not exist. "The miracle," Genet tells us, "was that there was no miracle: God was hollow." He lost faith, but not religiosity: the world must remain sacred so that his acts all retain an aspect of the sacrilegious. God becomes in his mind a dishonest notion, as it was for Gide for a long time, a half-poetic, half-metaphysical catchall, at times the unknown object of a passing fervor, at times the warrant for Morality and the Sacred. And sometimes He even becomes, as we have seen, the source and basis of Evil. Indeed, at times Evil no longer has a positive correspondence, since Good, which is unobtrusive, bourgeois, terrestrial, is no longer commensurate with it: so God joins its side. A priest in *Funeral Rites* is upset about being caught in the act of sinning, "whereas it was precisely sin which had put him in a state of grace." At times the child, overwhelmed with disgust and loneliness, abandons himself for a

moment: he is about to pray. But the prayer immediately stops on his lips: if God *wills* Evil, even as a test, then Evil is Good. At the moment of his death, Pilorge cries out:

Forgive me, my God, because I have sinned.

But in the following stanza this God is already

The Lord of dark places,

that is, a Demiurge who greatly resembles Satan. And, as a finishing touch, Genet transforms him into a pagan and symbolic divinity in whom he does not believe:

Soft-footed Hermes,

god of shopkeepers and thieves.

But if neither God nor society any longer guarantees the Good, where is one to find a guarantee? Genet's cardinal notions are already wavering: "*Killing* can be good." Indeed, if the sign of Evil is *torment,* the sign of Good should be joy. "This can be recognized by the joyous exaltation of the murderer." One step further and we arrive at the conclusion we were *bound* to reach: Genet himself will be a warrant of Good and Evil alike. The only crime would be *self-destruction.* For Mind is life, light. But *who* can define suicide as the Absolute of Evil if not the very person who is *himself* for himself, if not Genet in person? Indeed, we have seen the child *poetically* become, by deliberate compensation, his own god. Thus, Genet becomes the source of Good and Evil; it is he who produces, for himself, Good and Evil in themselves and for themselves. Starting from an objective morality and an objective relationship with men, he attains moral solipsism. Can he stick to it? Hardly. For, after all, if he decides as a sovereign legislator, what reason can he find for performing forbidden acts *against* himself? Why continue to will Evil? And against whom? He has to assume otherness, and the one who legislates must be other than the one who obeys. Not long ago, it was the Other who willed Evil in Genet, and his powerless consciousness that willed Good. At present, it is his consciousness that wills Evil, and it is the Other who wills Good. But if, once again, a powerful outsider with whom he is battling has installed himself within him, then it is the entire mob which has re-entered him, and God as well: solipsism is untenable.*

* The dialectic of doing has a solipsistic *moment* (and *only* a moment), like the dialectic of being.

Even if we did, for a moment, accept it, we would not thereby get out of the circle of contradictions: if suicide is the greatest crime, it is also the only one which it is impossible to commit. As we have seen, evil will and the will to live are one and the same in the child. To kill oneself is to commit the worst, but at the same time it is to renounce Evil, not only because, with the bursting of this desperate little soul, good and evil, judge and culprit, torturer and victim, would disappear together, but above all because suicide is also abandon, slackening, because the choice of living in order to do evil was a revolt against the impossibility of life. Nevertheless, he must kill himself or rather must convince himself that it is as if he had killed himself. Unable to do away with himself all at once, the child will kill himself piecemeal: he will internalize his suicide and spread it over his entire existence. Moreover, the choice of living was already a choice of surviving himself. Everything jibes: there is an intelligible choice of death, and life is its temporal development. On the imaginary level where Genet made himself the cause of himself, he becomes the cause of his death: to create oneself and to kill oneself come to the same thing. Existence is no longer anything but an interminable death-agony which has been willed. And each crime will have value not so much for the Evil it brings to the universe as for its being a willed repetition of the original death. One kills in order to kill oneself. Querelle, the murderer, is a "joyous suicide." And in *Funeral Rites* Genet wonders "what one kills in oneself" when one commits a crime. He concludes that "[to kill] is to fire at God, to wound God and to make a mortal enemy of him." We have already encountered this theme: death is the condemnation by society, which kills a child and creates a culprit. But in this case murder is no longer "a gift of life." "Riton," writes Genet, "kills so that he may live, since these murders are the pretext for and means of a higher life." No doubt, but this higher life is precisely the achieving of one's symbolic death. In that case, the joyous exaltation of living is the exaltation of dying. We relapse into the stereotyped repetition of the original crisis: the child dies because he has stolen, then he steals in order to die. But at the same time the paradox recurs: if the moment of self-willed death is the *absolute* moment, does it result in our attaining Sovereign Good—since Good is Being and is Life—or Sovereign Evil? Unable to decide, Genet abandons immanence: there is a transcendent Good, a God whose orders one cannot transgress and who damns, an all-powerful Society. Whereupon the cycle starts again; we shall not escape from it. Evil is always elsewhere.

If I look for it in the Subject, it jumps into the Object; if I rush to the Object, it returns to the Subject. Hidden, lateral, evanescent, it derives all its force from Good. In fact, its favorite food is the fat souls of the respectable. He who wants Evil for Evil's sake is staggered, blinded, paralyzed by Good. But he who claims, with peace in his heart, to conform to good principles is he who is rotted from beneath by the unclean, velvety existence of a satanic postulation. "The Worst is not always sure," says Claudel. Indeed, for Genet it is not sure. But for him who proclaims that it is not sure, who is chock-full of Being and turns everything to the glory of Good, the worst is always sure: the Evil that Genet seeks in agony is quietly installed in Claudel's heart.

Genet would no doubt grant all this. He is far too clear-minded to be unaware of his contradictions. And he states outright in *Funeral Rites:* "If Evil arouses such passion, the reason is that it is itself a Good, since one can love only what is good, that is, alive."

What then? If the will to Evil was, at the very moment of its birth, already transformed into a will to *some good,* one must recognize that this will *is impossible.* Genet's endeavor ends in failure.

But what if this failure were a victory? What if he realized, at the very moment of renouncing Evil, that this radical impossibility is what he always *wanted?* Have we not said that he is playing *loser wins?* The intention of doing evil is riddled with contradictions. Agreed. But there is in Genet an even more radical intention which he does not have to prove possible since it already exists, to wit, *the intention of willing Evil.* This intention is purely and simply himself. At the moment of sinking and being sucked into the swamp, the child decided to will what was imposed upon him, and by means of that perfectly pure and categorical decision he achieved the *disconnection;* he wrested himself from the toils of being; he *defined* and *created* himself, for he is that and that alone: the sudden movement of the back that transforms the fall into a plunge. From then on, there is no longer either fall or plunge, but simply the eternal transformation of one into the other, and *that* is Jean Genet: the indefinitely prolonged moment of the break. Evil offers itself and Genet throws himself into it. And no doubt he will never encounter it. He will steal and betray and lie, but in vain; absolute evil cannot be captured by these gestures. The will to will can never become an effective and conscious will. At times a "verbal idea" occurs to us, not only a thought, but a thought which already secretes the sentence that will express it. The music of the sentence, its rhythm, its cut, the arrangement of the words, everything is

given simultaneously as a presentiment and a desire in the indistinction of the original project; the meaning and the expression are one and the same. We seem to be already touching the words which will render the thought explicit. And then the words never come. We try several, one after the other, and each of them coarsens the thought, falsifies and deflects it. In the end, we do not know whether our vocabulary is inadequate or whether the idea is, by its nature, inexpressible. Similarly with Genet: each concrete achievement falsifies the original intention. It doesn't matter; he rids himself of it and attempts to achieve something else. No sooner does he will a particular evil or a pure motive for willing Evil than he falls into the infernal circle. But he doesn't care: the essential thing is never to abandon the original melody, the precise, yet unformulated idea of the sentence to be shaped. Since he is in the circle, he goes round and round. He is constantly jumping from one Evil to another, from one motive to another, from others to self, from the Evil of Consciousness to Consciousness in Evil, from torment to joyous exaltation, from death to life, from life to death, without ever stopping anywhere, clearly aware that he will never catch up with the Worst but that at least, by this infinite movement, he makes it exist beyond its very impossibility, like the shadow of an ideal, and that he confronts being, life and men as an infinite dissatisfaction, as an unrealizable exigency. Genet wants not only to will Evil, he wants to be the martyr of the impossibility of willing it. Not only does he decide to attempt the best and the worst, but he demands the radical failure of his attempt. He might, like certain great demoniacs—and like Baudelaire himself or Lautréamont—have placed himself under the protection of Satan. But he is too aware of his situation to fall into Manichaeism. The evildoer is not Manichaeist; Manichaeism defines the thinking of the honest man. "God always wins the game," says Genet. Lucifer crosses swords with God. Well and good. But God eternally knocks the sword from Lucifer's hand. When Genet decides to will the Worst, he knows that the Worst has lost, that it had lost before his birth, even before the birth of the world, and that there would have been no Evil, from the very beginning, if there did not appear in every generation a few headstrong men who relentlessly go on playing a game, trickily, which has *already been won* by the opponent. And his defeat takes place not only in the noble theater of metaphysics; he lives it from day to day in the vulgar world of daily existence. In this world Genet is vanquished in advance, not only by the crushing machinery of the police, but above all because society has antici-

pated the existence of thieves and regards them calmly as normal products of nonassimilation. Somewhere in his books he compares Evil to excrement, and if shit flows freely in his works, it does so because it represents brute evil, for Evil and Shit both imply the insolent health of a stomach that digests well. Genet *is* excrement, and it is as such that he asserts himself. What is more, he is a negligible quantity. What do a few lice in his hair matter to society? An evildoer who elects to become an evildoer succeeds only in enhancing social morality, since he is acknowledging that Evil is loathsome. He would be far more feared if he were willing to say that he was a revolutionary. If Genet were a Communist, he would be worthy of the hatred of middle-class people; he is only evil: his sufferings, his spasms and the terrible work that he is doing on himself will fail to disturb the composure of these good consciences; he tortures himself in vain.

But that is what he must want; that is what he does want. All his heroes, the toughest, the most criminal, the handsomest, are arrested, imprisoned, humiliated. It is to the vanquished that his love goes out. Marchetti and Darling languish in prison; Harcamone, Pilorge, Our Lady of the Flowers will be guillotined, and the moment of their supreme glory coincides with that of their ignominious death. Shortly after the liberation of Paris a newsreel was shown on a Paris screen: it showed a young militiaman* who had been caught on a roof by members of the Resistance; his companions were dead; the triumphant enemy was surrounding him and sneering, crushing him with its contempt. He was not even given the honors of war; letting himself be caught was probably his last act of cowardice; no doubt he was brooding on the shame of surviving. In the theater, the audience is laughing with hatred and disgust. In the midst of this crowd which is drunk with triumph, Genet is thrilled: to the young coward wallowing in abjection he delivers a silent and passionate declaration of love, elated at being the only one who loves him. I can testify to the fact that during the occupation he had no particular liking for the Germans. No doubt he admired, on principle, Nazi malevolence. But then what? They were victors, their triumphant Evil was likely to become institutional, it would be a new order, a new Good. And this order, like the other, would condemn theft and common-law crime. When they were defeated, routed, humiliated, he began to love them, and I heard him defend them publicly when it was highly dangerous

* The *Milice* (Militia) was a Nazi military organization composed of Frenchmen.—Translator's note.

to do so. We have seen Genet playing at baseness; we can guess that he will dream of playing at failure: in *The Thief's Journal* a band of counterfeiters surrenders to the police without putting up a fight. When someone becomes indignant, Armand, a hero of Evil, so evil that Genet finally says he is good, declares: "They wanted to give themselves a treat that they never in their lives had time for: getting cold feet." In the very depths of the Evil to which they had had the courage to penetrate, they were asked to make a further effort: to give up even their courage and finally to act like cowards. This theme has so fascinated Genet that only recently he thought of making it the subject of a play. But deliberate cowardice is courage. And furthermore, in order to be able to carry on his evil activity, it is advisable, despite everything, that Genet not be caught. His thefts, though successfully carried out, must be failures *in the imaginary*. Nevertheless, his whole life is a deliberate defeat, and this defeat *designates* him, reveals him in his absolute existence.

Indeed, at this point is revealed a monstrous and providential concording of the misfortune of his own life with the basic structure of Evil. For Genet's life is an accepted failure, and evil, which is a destruction of *everything,* must, as a consequence, aim at the destruction of itself. Evil wishes for the failure of the evildoer, Evil *wishes* Evil *evil.** Thus, at the heart of evil is a sanctuary wherein dwells the deepest Evil, the final and lamentable failure of every evil undertaking, the betrayal of Evil by Evil. That is how we must interpret Claudel's formula: "Evil does not compromise." Radical Evil is the misfortune of the evildoer who is reduced to impotence. The failure of his life, of his will to do evil and of Evil itself—Genet must will this trinity all together. Since he wills Evil to the limit, he must will it until it is totally impotent, until the bad is crushed by the good, until the final triumph of Good.

All at once, Genet has just discovered the greatest Evil: to betray. For betrayal is not a return to Good. It is the Evil which does evil to itself. Two negations are not equivalent to an affirmation: they get lost, tangled up in each other, in the mad darkness of the nay. Genet had discovered an immediate and tragic Evil: crime. He will never be a criminal, but he can be the canker of crime, the gnawing parasite of Evil. Betrayal is, in effect, a parasitic crime since it has to be grafted on another crime. It is, so to speak, a second-degree crime, a reflexive crime. That suits Genet to a T. His mind is made up: he will be a traitor.

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* As in the expression "to wish someone well."—Translator's note.

We thus come to the famous decision to betray which has earned him so many enemies. As a criminal, he would, if necessary, be accepted; as a traitor, he horrifies. Our loathing of betrayal must be very strong for us to prefer even murder. I would like to offer proof of this, an amusing proof. Everyone knows that the surrealists took it upon themselves to destroy the values of Christian civilization. They invited the Mongol horsemen to take their horses to pasture on the hills of the Sacred Heart, to water them in the Seine. They declared that the simplest surrealist act was to fire a revolver into a crowd. Yet, in the concert of outcries provoked by the apology for betrayal that Genet published in *Les Temps Modernes* it was the surrealists who yelled loudest. They had already condemned his homosexuality, and now they were outraged by his delations. One would think that in their undertaking of demolition they have systematically spared heterosexuality and respect for plighted faith. These values can, in certain moral frameworks and, in particular, in Christian ethics, be perfectly justified, but I do not see how surrealism as such can stand up for them. In fact, the great sexual orgies in the works of the Marquis de Sade almost always include homosexual coupling, with anal intercourse and fellatio. The surrealists ought first to read *Philosophy in the Boudoir.* And one could cite a number of characters in *Juliette* who gained the confidence of their future victims only to ruin them more surely. Is not this betrayal? And what about Maldoror, what is he doing when he lavishes tenderness on the child he means to slaughter? Furthermore, in the Spanish-fly affair, it is certain that Sade was buggered by his valet. How can the surrealists reconcile their admiration for Lautréamont and Sade with the contempt they profess for Genet? But, after all, that's their affair. I wished merely to show that Genet has made a good choice: the loathing of traitors must be very primitive and deeply rooted in our hearts for it to impose limits on so radical and sincere an undertaking of liberation.

Did Genet choose betrayal or did betrayal choose him? Both. He reached a decision at the end of a dialectical process which took a long time to mature in him, but when he took the plunge, he had long since been driven to betray. Before he even dreamed of an act of delation, everyone knew he was a traitor. At Mettray, that was the first insult hurled at him. Once again, events have outstripped him. Once again, all he can do is internalize the judgment which constitutes him from without. When he wants to do Evil, Society has already ordained him an evildoer, and when he wants to betray, he is already an *objective traitor.*

Objectively, betrayal is a social fact. Initiate of a sacred community to which he owes his rebirth, the traitor takes advantage of this new existence to turn against the society that begot him and to betray its secrets. The criminal is less hated: if one of the initiates commits a murder, he becomes Another, but it suffices to exclude him in order to preserve the group's integrity. If he betrays, it is the entire society which becomes Another. To be sure, the society originally established itself against an enemy, against Another (another religious persuasion, another country, another class), and it knows that to that Other it is the Enemy, it is Evil, but it does not care about this, for it is outside. The judgment of this external adversary is, in fact, useful to it, cements it, supports its internal unity by an external cohesion. What it is for the Other is its body; what it is for itself is its soul. But if it should suspect that there is a traitor in its midst, everything changes: the Other's gaze, suddenly conveyed within its soul, petrifies it; the soul becomes a body, the outside moves inside, what was most private becomes public, subjectivity changes into an object. Above all, what makes the situation intolerable is that it itself has, through the initiation ceremonies, produced the traitor who looks at it with the Other's eyes. Its deepest inwardness has secreted the externality which is going to wreck it. "There's a traitor among us!" That is all that is needed; we feel the metamorphosis to our very depths; each of us becomes, for all the others, a potential traitor; each of us feels the petrifying gaze of the Other upon him. The original unity explodes; there remains only a large number of solitudes. And yet the traitor's gaze is still our gaze; it is a perversion of our own eyes. For to betray is not to spy. The spy is only dangerous; he has had himself initiated only with the intention of spying on us. Consequently, his initiation is not valid; owing to the very fact of his evil intentions, it was only make-believe. But the traitor (when he was not thinking of betraying) was the object of a veritable consecration. He really emanates from the community; he is a thought which a mind conceives only to discover suddenly that it is Another's thought. The consciousness of being betrayed is to the collective consciousness of a scared group what a certain form of schizophrenia is to the individual. Like the latter, society could cry out: "I've been robbed of my thought." In short, it is a form of madness.

Is it possible to believe, after this, that betrayal is a matter of chance? As social integration grows stronger, there are fewer traitors. When a certain point has been reached, they are not even conceivable. Their existence reveals a certain slackening of the collective bond, and the degree to which an army has grown weaker

is usually measured by the number of turncoats. But even in a disintegrating society they are recruited according to certain rules: not all who would be are traitors. The man who aspires to deliver his brothers is the first victim of the group's dissolution; it was in himself that the dissolution first occurred. Before he stole the thought of others he felt with terror that his own was being stolen. While considering the society about him with enemy eyes, he still feels that he belongs to it. He knows that he owes his existence to it, and even the possibility of harming it. I would go so far as to say that he is all the more aware of it in that he is closer to selling himself. "And then madness was very near," says T. E. Lawrence, "as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments." Such is the case of the traitor. Within the group he is the Other and the man through whom the group will know itself as Another. But this is so because he is first, within himself, another than himself. This traitor is a madman, it is *himself* whom he betrays. A disintegrating society, an individual who is an enemy to himself and who experiences this disintegration as a disease of his personality: such are the necessary and sufficient conditions for betrayal to occur.

Both conditions are fulfilled in the case of Genet. What can he actually betray? Nothing other than the society of thieves. Honest people are not involved, since they have excluded him; in fact, it is *for their benefit* that he will commit his act of betrayal. No doubt the social nature of delation is not immediately apparent: in the facts which are reported it is always a matter of "squealing" on a companion. One would think that a crime had been committed against friendship, against love, that is, against the couple and not against the group. But this is an illusion which is quickly dissipated. One has only to read *The Thief's Journal:* Guy and Genet are thinking of robbing a friend who himself seems to be a thief or swindler. In order to enter his home without running a risk, they decide to get rid of him. Guy thinks of killing him; Genet suggests that they squeal on him. This is a blunder. Guy looks at him in amazement which quickly changes to outrage. In order to appease him, Genet assures him that the suggestion was meant only to test him.

Now, Guy has just serenely agreed to rob a fellow thief. Therefore his scruples cannot be attributed to respect for friendship. Nor has he any intention of handling the victim with kid gloves, since he declares himself ready to "bump him off." Quite the contrary, the lesser evil for the victim would be to inform against him; he

would get off with a few months in prison. But what Guy hates about betrayal is not that it causes needless suffering, but that it is a taboo. To bump off a pal when he is off guard or by stabbing him in the back is perfectly all right. But one mustn't turn him over to the cops: that kind of thing isn't done. Guy's indignation is of social origin; through it the whole Underworld defends itself against an act of sacrilege.

However, the fact is that this collectivity is in a state of chronic disintegration. There is no true bond among thieves. All that they have in common is the cult of Evil. This cult unites them only in appearance; Evil isolates, it excludes reciprocity. The piquancy of the story lies in the fact that Guy is himself a squealer, that Genet knows it and that Guy suspects he knows it. This is unimportant: they are both traitors, but Genet should not have said so. Thus, the society of crime, with its rites and prohibitions, becomes a sham, a kind of dream that hoodlums harbor so as not to have to face their solitude. The permanent and constantly unmentioned fact of this society is delation, and the fundamental human relationship is not that of thief to thief but of thief to police. It is the criminal who creates the police, and it is the police who create the criminal. They fascinate him, they present him with his image in reverse. Narcissus gazes at himself in the eyes of the cops. The Cop is the Other, he who harbors in his depths the secret essence of the thief. "The opposite of his friend," says the guard in *Deathwatch,* "which doesn't mean his enemy." The bond which unites them is as close as that between the executioner and his victim. In Genet's books they track each other down, fight, kill each other and finally make love. The fascination that the police have for the thief is manifested by the thief's temptation to confess when he is arrested. In the presence of the examining magistrate who questions him, he is seized with giddiness: the magistrate speaks gently to him, perhaps with kindness, explaining what is expected of him; practically nothing: an assent. If only once, just once, he did what was asked of him, if he uttered the "yes" that is requested, harmony of minds would be achieved. He would be told, "That's fine," perhaps he would be congratulated. It would be the end of hatred. The desire to confess is the mad dream of universal love; it is, as Genet himself says, the temptation of the human. But complete confession does not differ from betrayal. Even if he confessed without naming his accomplices, he would already be betraying them:* the mere desire to "cross

* Moreover, how could he give details about his crime without furnishing information that would lead to their arrest?

the line," to be among the honest people, is a traitor's desire. If he opens his mouth, all is consummated: nothing can stop him, since there is no sharp dividing line between confession and delation. Furthermore, the criminal, possessed by Evil, is constrained to live in appearance to the very end: no sooner has he confessed to his crime than he sheds his illusion. The judge's tone will change at once, the appearance of harmony and love will vanish. By wanting to deserve gentleness the criminal has earned reprobation. When he has signed his confession, he is tossed back into the world of Evil, but this world itself rejects him since he returns to it as a traitor. The criminal knows all this before breathing a word. Nevertheless, he will confess. A shipwrecked man on a raft cannot keep from drinking sea water, although he knows perfectly well that it will intensify his thirst.

It is this double fascination, by the Police and the Society of Theft, which explains the nervousness of Genet's heroes and their sudden changes of mood which he describes so often. They practice, as it were, double-entry bookkeeping; that is, they are always ready to betray in order to achieve, be it only for a moment, a semblance of harmony with honest people, and they are always ready to return amongst their fellows, to conceal their delation, to pursue an appearance of brotherhood-in-crime. At times, all these squealers tearfully throw themselves into each other's arms, they cherish and cajole each other, lull each other with a great initiatic dream of sacred union. And then, the very next moment, the queen, drying her tears, goes to the local police station and denounces her lover. One need only recall the extraordinary versatility of "The Maids," screaming, laughing, weeping, spitting in each other's face and kissing each other on the lips; one would think one were witnessing a tragic version of *Gros chagrins*. After all these demonstrations of tenderness, one says to the other, without anger: "If I had killed Madame, you'd have been the first to denounce me." This instability of mood is due to an instability of situation; it gives evidence of the fact that the sacred unity of the couple, which is always about to be achieved, always fails to come off at the last moment.

Furthermore, the conflicts of interest which, for want of arbitration, set thieves against each other lead to betrayal. Plato points out, in *The Republic,* that a society of unjust men cannot be effectual unless it observes, at least within itself, the rules of justice: "These unjust men are in no way capable of acting in cohesion with each other. . . . If, however, one speaks of men who, though unjust, have practiced, in cohesion with each other, a solid com-

munity of action, one is not, in saying this, expressing the full truth, for they would not have spared each other if they had been entirely unjust. Indeed, it is manifest that they had within them a certain justice, the simultaneous effect of which was that, at least with respect to each other, they firmly abstained from injustice, whereas they practiced it against their adversaries."

From which he concludes, of course, that radical injustice is radical impotence: "Those who are complete evildoers and thoroughly unjust are, ultimately, incapable of acting." But he does not convince us because his argumentation remains too abstract, too purely logical. If he had gone to the trouble of considering the underworld of his time, he would have seen that societies of unjust men can maintain a certain efficacy in destructive undertakings, provided only that they be inhabited by an *appearance* of justice. But this deceptive justice is itself the worst of injustices. He is right in saying that the society of the unjust would be radically pulverized if injustice manifested itself openly and exposed itself as a universal practice, for it cannot suffer universalization. But avowed injustice is not, contrary to what he thinks, the supreme injustice. Since it declares itself, at least it contains a modicum of truth. The worst is the best concealed; it cares very little about being raised to the universal, because of the fact that it secretly longs to be the sole exception to the rule. The unjust man requires that the others observe this rule among themselves and in relation to him, for he needs a certain external order to be able to act, and though he may not really conform to it, he at least pretends to submit to it in order to incite the others to obey it and the better to deceive them, and also because he loves the criminal community and is glad to belong to it. And he no doubt is quite aware that his apparent submission to the common rites confers upon him only an apparent freedom of the city in that society, but this pretense is enough for him. In fact, that is what he is seeking, for it is the essential nature of the evildoer to prefer the reflection to being and the diabolical image to reality. A strange society, in which each individual retains the trappings of order both out of love and the better to attain final disorder. But precisely because of this hypocrisy, it presents an appearance of morals and regularity, of values, rites, prohibitions. And this apparent justice, which is a diabolical imitation of the real one and which issues entirely from the desire to do evil, is sufficient to ensure the efficacy of a common undertaking, provided that the latter aims at destruction. A leader who is only the ghost of a leader commands phantom soldiers who obey him only so as

the better to destroy him. He is aware of this without saying so, and will pretend to be a leader in order to be able to get his hands on the cash and flee at the right moment. This is all that is needed to "do a job," to break into a house and carry out a burglary. For the betrayal is prepared long in advance, is thought about for a long time, and, while it is being organized, discipline is observed all the more strictly in that the participants are more urgently obliged to shift suspicion, whereas one needs only a few hours to plan a holdup. Plato, in a more inspired mood, has shown that the total negation of unity requires and produces a kind of nightmarish unity: "In groups of several . . . however many there be, they will be other with respect to each other; indeed, one by one it would be impossible, since there is not a one. But amongst them, as I have heard, the singularity of a mass is an infinite plurality and, even if one took what seems to be the smallest possible piece, as in a dream, it appears to be several all at once instead of one as it seemed to be." The smallest piece is several, but, inversely, the largest plurality seems to be one. For the multiple requires distinct individualities which frankly oppose each other. The world of plurality is the world of the atom or, in the social sphere, that of brutality. To make of individuals the seat of an indivisible unity is to restore with one hand what one destroys with the other and, in the case with which we are concerned, is to deny unity to the universe in order to discover it in the inwardness of the individual consciousness. But, in the absolute negation of unity, the individual himself, who is other than all the others, is other than himself in his own consciousness. Thus, he does not have enough force really to oppose all and to engender a true, anarchic plurality. Unity and multiplicity disappear together, their specters remain and shimmer at the surface of being: no unity means unity everywhere and of anything with anything; being presents itself in huge, massive aggregates; but this large appearance collapses as soon as one touches it, only to be reborn elsewhere, always elsewhere. Absence of unity is appearance playing at being; it is *unity become an evil.* Such is the society of thieves, such is the thief in himself. If he makes an effort to feel, to live his membership in the community, the illusion is dissipated, he is alone, but if he wishes to draw the inferences from his solitude and to pursue his own ends, he is haunted by his elusive unity with the sacred society.

In this nursery of informers, Genet, more than anyone else, is doomed to betrayal, and the young hoodlums of Mettray were right about him. To begin with, he is doomed despite himself and simply

because he exists, and also because he is Another to himself and betrays himself, whatever he may do; in addition, he is doomed because he has taken refuge on the plane of reflective consciousness and is never quite *with* his fellow inmates, never quite involved in their passions and projects. He watches them and sees himself watching them, he talks to them and listens to himself talking to them. This already amounts to practicing mental restriction. Lastly, he is a traitor because he has made himself a lucid man, a homosexual, an aesthete and a poet. As a lucid man, he betrays thieves by his corrosive power; as a homosexual, by his fake submission; as an aesthete, by his admiration for the qualities which they possess unwittingly and which they despise in others; as a poet, by the songs he dedicates to them. He will claim later that he lends them a language, like Lefranc, who writes love letters for Green Eyes. But neither Green Eyes nor Maurice is taken in; when Lefranc wants to *manifest* their merits, he steals their brilliant deeds to adorn himself with them.

But that is not all. The moment the gates of Mettray closed behind Genet, he found himself in the position of a double agent, but in reverse. It is not that two societies fight to have him, but rather that they toss him back and forth like a ball. In the present case, it amounts to the same thing. Rigorously excluded from the society of the good, he is reluctantly tolerated at the lowest level in that of the bad. His integration into the latter is not complete enough to dispel his longing for the former, and the place he occupies in it is too low for him not to have the ambition to rise in it, that is, to be more integrated into it. Thus, he finds himself under the sway of two contrary and simultaneous forces. And of two resentments as well: in order to hurt the white society which has rejected him, he would devote himself with all his soul to the black society, but the latter persecutes and humiliates him. In fact, it brands him with the name of traitor even before he proves himself one. He tells us that when he was sixteen the inmates "regarded him as a coward, traitor . . . homo. . . ." Another "dizzying" word that brands him, another Destiny that is forged for him. The reason is that he is not their kind; because he is too intelligent, too glib, too educated, he disturbs them; because he is too weak, he cannot impose respect. Guilty in the eyes of honest people, he is *suspect* in the eyes of thieves. One can understand his being torn at first between the passionate desire to dispel these biases and the eagerness to justify them. And as they cannot be overcome, it is the eagerness that prevails. What else could he have done? Taken refuge in a haughty

solitude? That, in fact, is what he tried to do, but the only way of access was precisely betrayal. Even had he retired to a desert, he could not have escaped from these two opposing societies, for he carried them within himself. He had only one way of ensuring his protection against them: to play each against the other. Once again the *unity* of his person lies in his double-dealing.

Be that as it may, delation is only a dizzying fate until the moment Genet sees it as the supreme Evil. The historical event then emerges at the meeting point of an objective process of disintegration and of a subjective dialectic of evil will: a freedom chooses betrayal as its supreme end. Thereupon, betrayal is integrated into Genet's universe and acquires the chief characteristics of that universe. *Lived by Genet,* it becomes sacrilege, poetry, paradoxical ambiguity of the instant, ascesis.

Sacrilege first, because it undertakes deliberately to violate a religious prohibition. Genet is too unconcerned about the consciousness of others to be interested in the sufferings he is likely to cause. On the other hand, he has an essentially religious mind, and the sacred is a permanent concern of his. Similar in this respect to the sociologists of the French School, he regards society as the source of the sacred. He once believed in God, and if he no longer does it is not as a result of having turned his corrosive power upon the truth of the church, but because his condemnation comes from men. He profaned a host without damage; God remained silent. The church which excommunicated him was secular society. Now, betrayal directly attacks the social bond, the essence of the collectivity. And no doubt it is the community of crime that he will betray, but through it he is aiming at the unity of the church. He knows perfectly well that he will not shatter it, that he will not even manage to endanger it. But he doesn't care: the aim of his act is to endow him with a certain being and not to change the order of the world; he betrays in order to become sacrilegious. Thus, despite the fact that the words "betrayal" and "saintliness" scream in protest when one tries to yoke them, we must recognize that the concepts which correspond to them are homogeneous in Genet's mind, though to us they are remote from each other. Both designate an immediate relationship of man to the sacred. The saint transcends all written law; he does more and other than what he is ordered to do. In like manner, betrayal—at least in the case of "squealing" on thieves—is not forbidden by the code; it entails no legal sanction. In fact, Good uses it to combat Evil. Betrayal thus appears to

be a refinement upon vulgar offenses. It is the transcendence of the forbidden as saintliness is the transcendence of duty.

If poetry is very likely to become betrayal, betrayal, when practiced systematically, certainly becomes poetry. Betrayal is carried out by means of words and manifests the omnipotence of the Logos. It is Evil rid of its retinue of violent emotions—gunfire, bloodshed, pursuit—and reduced to the simple demoniacal utilization of speech. No doubt, in a certain sense, the statement of denunciation remains prose: "Yesterday, at such and such a time, X broke into Y's home." One seems to be limiting oneself to stating facts. But these few words, murmured in a judge's chamber, operate like a spell cast from a distance. This magic formula will necessarily cause a man's arrest and perhaps his death. To betray is to engender a destiny by means of words.

This whispered conversation has the diabolical aspect that appeals to Genet more than anything else: it is a game of appearances, a shimmering of nothingness and being. It has the appearance of a complicity with Good: in answering the kindly questions of the sacred representative of Society, Genet can retain for a moment the illusion of reciprocity. But as soon as the reply has been given, the illusion disappears along with the kindliness of the judge. The latter defends himself, against the Evil of which he has made use, by displaying his contempt. But the irritating disappearance of the mirage of reciprocity is just what Genet wanted and what he wished to cause. A strange situation: at one and the same moment, Good uses Evil to attain Good, and Evil uses Good to attain a worse Evil. But Evil emerges strengthened; it has compelled Good to serve it. To harm Evil with evil intention and to reduce it to impotence is the height of perversity. The undertaking remains in the usual order of things: Evil, which is absolute negation, must, as we have seen, be its own negation; it aspires to failure. Good, on the other hand, compromises with the worst; it has rewarded delation, the traitor remains unpunished, he has perhaps been paid. Thus, the just man admits that his Justice does not pursue *Evil* but a certain *particular* Evil and that, in order to demolish it, he does not hesitate to become an accomplice of a worse Evil. This entire metamorphosis takes place in an instant. The moment the judge's smile congeals, reciprocity becomes an exile and the temptation of the human causes Genet to sink and drown in the inhuman. Here, as everywhere, we find again the cathartic crisis and the paradox of the instant.

Above all, betrayal has the merit of being repulsive to the traitor.

The traitor is ugly, he is cowardly, he is weak. He hides himself in order to denounce. He will live in terror. Genet knows all this. For him these are reasons for betraying. There is an even deeper reason: one can betray only what one loves. The spy has a clear conscience. He helps to destroy the enemy. He lies, he fakes, but he has allegiances of which he is proud. The criminal kills unknown people in order to rob them: what is Monsieur Ragon to Our Lady? But it is *against* his allegiances, *against* his loves, that the traitor's zeal is directed. If he were not yet bound with all his fibers to the society he denounces, if he did not still love with all his soul the friend he is going to turn in, would he be a traitor? The man who wants to raise betrayal to the height of a principle will draw from his love a motive for betraying. If crime is suicide, the only valid delation is a brutal amputation. But one must go through with the operation, must cut into the flesh, must rip away, one by one, all the persons whom one loves, must deserve their contempt. Then, having reached the limit of this systematic deprivation, one will be able to say, like Lefranc: "I really am all alone." One will still be living in the world, but the world will then be only a flat painting, an optical illusion. One will know that sounds and lights, words, smiles, blows, are only glittering appearances at the surface of a dark emptiness. The criminal dies at the moment of the crime. That is why the second murder is superfluous: it will bring nothing more. Betrayal, on the other hand, is an ascesis which little by little dissipates the phantasmagoria and leads by degrees to a horrible nirvana of despair, darkness and self-hatred.

It seems that the pure Will, in liquidating all the materiality which still encumbered it, has finally taken itself as goal, for, as we have just seen, the impossibility of conceiving a coherent Evil incites the will to will itself as a pure intention—forever disappointed —of doing evil. In short, Genet then identifies himself with the *spiritual* project of a will willing itself evil, that is, a *will to will*, a reflective whole that quite naturally finds a place in the development of this consciousness which ponders itself. By means of treason Genet wrests himself from his body, from his life, even from his sensibility. He ruins his loves, destroys his self, confers upon himself a new dignity in infamy which enables him to despise himself more thoroughly. What remains? Not even a will that wills itself evil: a will that wills the failure of its project, that wants to will Evil and wants Evil to be impossible. The intention of doing Evil is torn by a contradiction as soon as it manifests itself, but at this

point a deeper choice is revealed, one which supports this intention only because it desires this conflict. The evil intention is conceived only *in order* to contradict itself, because this contradiction reveals to us that Evil is an unattainable and inconceivable end of human freedom and because a fundamental act of will decrees that the impossibility of Evil *is* the greatest evil. An entire life dooms itself to failure; a hounded man, exiled from Good and from Being, learns to his cost that he cannot enter either Evil or Nonbeing; crimes are committed and yet they fail; murderers are denounced; Evil makes inroads into Good since there are corpses, victims, pain, but Good triumphs over Evil since the guilty person is reduced to impotence. But as a result of this Pyrrhic victory, Being and Good are soiled forever since they have prevailed over Evil only by coming to terms with it. As for Evil, it is resorbed into itself, without being able either to destroy itself completely or to destroy Being. It remains merely a rudderless negation which goes round in circles, maintains its demands hopelessly, a negation that can be neither named nor conceived: it is the "bastard dream" of which Plato speaks in the *Timaeus,* other than Good, other than Being, other than Consciousness and, finally, *other than itself.* But the profound will that we find in Genet assumes the impossibility of Evil and the annihilation of Being and (since evil is other than itself) it will will Evil to the point of that inner enmity which is none other than betrayal. The consciousness willing Evil for the World and for itself will pursue its own destruction in a universal conflagration. But this conflagration will never take place; the secret flaw of Evil, its destiny, is that it has always been conquered, it is conquered in advance. And consciousness assimilates the failure of its own life and the ontological failure of Evil. It betrays itself and others, it betrays its own acts of will by rejecting whatever positive elements they may still retain. Thus, it pursues its own nothingness. But since it is a consciousness of destroying itself and since it has rejected suicide once and for all, the quest for Nothingness is, for it, only the way in which it affirms its existence; and the more ruthless it is with itself, the more it exists. That is what Genet calls "the impossible nullity." Everything is impossible: the evildoer cannot *be,* but neither can he evaporate into nothingness. All the efforts he makes to be his being lead him back to that pure *conscious nonbeing:* consciousness. But if he returns to this nonbeing in order to vanish into it, he exists for himself in broad daylight, in a merciless transparency. The dazzling emergence of his subjectivity corresponds to the vanishing of his Ego. Thus, for Genet the general pattern of

his projects must remain the generalized *loser wins*. The impossibility of living is precisely the mainspring of his life, the impossibility of Evil is the triumph of the evil principle. The willed failure which is pursued unceasingly in his particular undertakings as in his total destiny becomes his victory. He is the being who makes himself exist through his impossible will to be. The traitor is the winner: he makes Evil win by forcing it to lose. He thrusts aside the great classical malignities—violence, murder—and finds at the core of Evil an emptiness, a fissure, that ontological crack which comes from its being a nonbeing and which will forever prevent it from "coming to terms." The traitor's choice is to become that fissure at the core of Evil, to be the Being of that Nonbeing in the very depths of the Nonbeing of Being. It is in this ontological fistula that Failure and Victory, Being and Nonbeing, Life and Death, Crime and Betrayal, meet and join each other. For if Evil is the Nonbeing of Being and if the impotence of Evil is the reappearance of Being in the depths of Nonbeing, there emerges a new reality which is both the Nonbeing of Being and the Being of Nonbeing, to wit, *appearance*. To destroy Being is to reduce it to pure appearance; to make of Evil an impotence is to convert it into *appearance;* to live the impossibility of living is to pursue, throughout a lifetime, an appearance of suicide; to discover oneself as an "impossible nullity" is to recognize that in pursuing within oneself one's own liquidation one makes oneself *appear* to oneself as a liquidator; to take refuge in lofty reflective consciousness is to discover that consciousness has alienated itself in appearance and to make it return into oneself, where it discovers that it has no being other than appearing, in other words, that it exists only insofar as it *appears to itself*. And, indeed, pure appearance is a nonbeing with respect to being since it *is not* but only appears; being is its impossibility. But, with respect to Nothingness, it is a being, for, as Hegel says, appearance qua appearance must, at the very least, *be;* therefore, its other possibility is *not to be*. Thus, Evil as an impossibility is appearance itself; betrayal is the revelation of appearance as such; what is harmful is the challenging of being by appearance. We shall see that Genet will come close to madness —then will save himself by art—for having devoted his life to making appearance as such exist against Being and against Nonbeing. For the moment, let us limit ourselves to noting that he thereby attains the dreadful freedom of which we spoke above. Convinced of being impossible, he aims at giving existence, in the teeth of the evidence, to the impossibility which he is. He becomes, in this pure,

desperate project, both the being who sustains in being his own impossibility of being and the being who makes himself exist by means of his own impossibility. One can find no better definition for a freedom which is both finite—hence tainted with nothingness —and absolute. Confronted with the divine *causa sui,* creator of itself and of the universe, Genet sets himself up as a demoniacal self-cause which enjoys its impotence and whose creative power is defined as an ascertained impossibility of giving itself being.

Here, for the first time, Genet makes contact with himself, but what he finds is not the *character* whom we have seen him seeking in mirrors, in the eyes of others, in the indifferent and terrible bodies of the handsome pimps. This unthinkable subjectivity which he touches beyond and within being, within and beyond the possible, is *existence.*

"There are few *good* thieves who do not reprobate theft. The following, noted in the cell during one of my incarcerations . . .

" 'If everybody stole, it would be a fine state of affairs.'

" 'That's not what I'm asking you. The question is, for me, whether *I* should steal.'

" 'Why you more than anyone else?'

"The person with whom I was conversing was a burglar. I willed myself a thief. But I claim to be a good thief. A philosophy, with its politics and ethics, cannot be derived from theft. Stealing is an activity I reserve for myself, hoping it will lead me to the possession of the maximum possible freedom."

We recognize the burglar's question: "Why *you* more than anyone else?"

It is the question that Abraham asks himself. When Genet says: "The question is, for me, whether *I* should steal," and the burglar replies: "Why *you?*" they are not speaking of the same Self. The burglar has been caught in the toils of the universal. The *self* of which he speaks is the universalizable particular, the one which shares with all others this state of being *self* and other than the others. It is the Hegelian particular, established, supported, transcended and absorbed by the universal. That of Genet is the individual I which has no common measure with the universal and the particular, which cannot be fixed in concepts but can only take risks and live its life. Genet does not resolve the contradiction; he lives it. If it transcended itself within him toward any synthesis, *Jean Genet* would disappear. The terms must be kept together *by means of speed.* If he stops, he is lost. In short, he *exists.* And when he declares that "a philosophy cannot be derived from theft,"

it is evident that he draws even nearer to Kierkegaard, since the latter declares that existence *is* simply and cannot furnish any philosophy.

Is he going to stop at that point? One step further and all the phantoms which hem him in will disappear. He will perhaps recognize that he was hoodwinked at the very beginning. He will perceive that the labyrinth of Good and Evil in which he lost his way was constructed by the respectable people the day when, out of sheer terror, they cut freedom in two. Being, Nonbeing, Nonbeing of Being and Being of Nonbeing, Sovereign Good, Sovereign Evil: he will now see these only as reflections which the two pieces shoot back and forth to each other. He has only to reweld these pieces for freedom to be re-established in its prime dignity. Then, perhaps, he will be tempted by real morality because it is beyond Being as it is beyond Evil, because it is as impossible as Evil and, like Evil, is doomed to failure, and because, in addition, it is one with Evil.*

But it should first be noted that Abraham is not so pure. There is a seed of alienation in Kierkegaardian ascesis itself. No doubt Abraham is seeking himself in anguish, no doubt he perceives no sign within himself or outside himself of his election, no doubt he refrains from acting *in order* to be Abraham. But this does not matter. Whatever his uncertainty, for God he either is Abraham or is not. God's gaze has constituted him from without: *Abraham is an object.*† In other words, the very form of the question "Am I Abraham?" subordinates praxis to Being. And similarly the following: "Should *I* steal?" For despite the fact that this *I* lives in a state of the most unbearable existential tension, the interrogation *relates* to it as if the latter were defined before the action. One can conceive

* And with Good. Either morality is stuff-and-nonsense or it is a concrete totality which achieves a synthesis of Good and Evil. For Good without Evil is Parmenidean Being, that is, Death, and Evil without Good is pure Nonbeing. To this objective synthesis there corresponds, as a subjective synthesis, the recovery of negative freedom and its integration into absolute freedom or freedom properly so-called. The reader will understand, I hope, that what is involved here is not a Nietzschean "beyond" Good and Evil, but rather a Hegelian *"Aufhebung."* The abstract separation of these two concepts expresses simply the alienation of man. The fact remains that, in the historical situation, this synthesis cannot be achieved. Thus, any Ethic which does not explicitly profess that it is *impossible today* contributes to the bamboozling and alienation of men. The ethical "problem" arises from the fact that Ethics is *for us* inevitable and at the same time impossible. Action must give itself ethical norms in this climate of nontranscendable impossibility. It is from this outlook that, for example, we must view the problem of violence or that of the relationship between ends and means. To a mind that experienced this agony and that was at the same time forced to will and to decide, all high-minded rebellion, all outcries of refusal, all virtuous indignation would seem a kind of outworn rhetoric.

† "No," says a certain believer: "God is *within* us." "How dishonest! God *within us* is the entire external in the internal." "Why not?" "Very well. But do you believe that you will remain 'internal'?"

of a starving man questioning himself to know whether hunger and destitution make theft legitimate, that is, whether there are well-defined situations which justify certain violent acts. But how could an *I* legitimize certain undertakings if this *I* were not given a priori and as a *Being?* In an ethic of praxis, the Ego is not distinguishable from its possibilities and projects. It is therefore defined by the complex body of its decisions, which are supported by an original choice, and is revealed only in and by acts. It can be the subject of investigation and evaluation only afterward. As soon as I wonder, *before* the theft, whether *I* should steal, I detach myself from my undertaking, I am no longer at one with it; I separate the maxim of my act from my intuition of myself as if they were two separate realities, and I decide as to their suitability or unsuitability as if it were a matter of a necktie and a shirt. This abstract attitude is called *nobility;* it is ruinous for both the act and the man. For if the *I* is no longer the inward quality which a freedom gives itself through the changes it effects in the world, it becomes, in one way or another, a reality which is without being made, that is, finally a substance. And, to be sure, Genet does not believe in the God of Abraham: nevertheless he cannot abstain from watching—through this free *existence for the impossible* which he has just attained and lived—for the revelation of a being that would be an object neither for himself nor for any other gaze and yet which would effect, in the mystery of its invisibility, the condensation of all objectivity. We are thus back at the starting point. The demand for freedom was only *a moment.* Genet did not desire it for its own sake. His other, older, more magical project still exists, nearby: he wants *to be,* he wants to derive his being from himself and to derive all his acts from his being. The presence of this ontological system influences, from a distance, his free project of existing and vitiates it at its source. Here again *doing* is subordinated to *being.* But Genet has become more profound, shrewder, he has acquired experience of himself. What he is going to aim at this time is not simply and crudely to *do* evil in order to be able to say to himself that he *is* wicked, but to make of being the invisible and subtle reverse of nothingness.

It suffices to *will* the failure for it to change into a success. There is nothing mysterious about this, except that we have launched, by means of words, one of those whirligigs of being and nonbeing, the sophistical character of which Jouhandeau neatly exposes when he writes: "If a man diverts himself by being bored, is he bored or is he diverting himself?" One says to a child who has been toying

with a precious piece of china and who finally breaks it: "Well, are you satisfied? You finally got what you wanted." And of course he was looking for the slaps that rained down on him: he was looking for them out of terror of receiving them. At the origin, there is nothing more. And there is nothing more in the zeal that certain people expend in destroying their happiness. It is the vertigo of the negative or the proud defense of the fox whose tail was cut off. Or both. But let us suppose that thereupon I move to the absolute. My failure was this quite dubious victory only by virtue of the obstinacy with which I had willed it. But what if I forgot that my will was only a paltry ruse? What if I made of this Pyrrhic victory an a priori characteristic of *every* defeat? Shall I not then discover a secret positivity which would be a kind of reverse of the negative?* I shall carry off this feat if I view my own failures from *both* my personal standpoint and that of Others.

In the case of a combatant who preferred his cause to all else and who did everything possible to win, failure is experienced in a state of despair. Action, says Malraux, is Manichaean. It follows that the man of action identifies his cause with that of the human race. From his point of view, when he loses and dies it is mankind that loses the contest in his person; the Devil triumphs—or matter. In any case, man's impossibility is proven. As long as he could still fight, the unhappy soldier thought that the future was in his hands. He *was* his own possibilities, and the *human* remained his fundamental possibility. As Ponge has aptly put it, man is the future of man. Captive, condemned to life imprisonment, to death, the man who is vanquished depends on the good pleasure of the victor; his potentialities break away from him and scatter through the universe. The idea of a kingdom of man becomes the dream of an idea. The prisoner is now only a thing that dreams of man. And since all human transcendency is taken away from him, man is a botch, freedom a dupery, mankind a time bomb that was set at the end of the Tertiary period to explode at that very minute. Thus, failure is Evil.

But later, for posterity, the failure becomes, as Jaspers puts it, a "figure." The reason is that the lost cause no longer finds defenders. It has ceased to be a matter of present interest. We dismiss both opponents, Barnave and Brissot, Danton and Robespierre. And we no doubt see clearly that Barnave was wrong: he vainly tried to stop the machine which he had set in motion. But what does it matter to us? We simply observe that the man had a certain grandeur and

* "The only durable aesthetic is that of failure. He who does not understand failure is lost. . . . If one has not understood this secret, this aesthetic, this ethic, one has understood nothing and glory is vain." (Jean Cocteau, *Opium.*)

that he was able to give his life for a value. Obviously, in doing so we are inverting the terms of the problem: *for him* his finest virtues were only means which he placed in the service of his cause; *for us* the cause is the means which enabled him to display his finest virtues: clear-sightedness, strength of mind in adversity. But this is so because we are no longer involved: the aim does not concern us; for us it is the attitude that matters. And if we adopt this point of view, we must admit that the victor does not appear to advantage. For the success is incorporated into being and immediately partakes of its contingency and inertia: the achievements which surround us and which we want to change are old victories that have rotted. In the last analysis, every achievement is a victory, and every victory becomes an achievement; human successes, taken as a whole, can be identified with what Hegel called the course of the world and what Marxists call the historical process. Thus, being blurs our triumphs and we no longer recognize them. There is nothing more than being, there never was anything but being, and being is all that there can be, neither more nor less. For the victor, too, victory makes man impossible. Since he has put his essence into his work, his life reverts to contingency, becomes a languid survival. Success entails a secret failure. On the other hand, a man who dies vanquished and jealously guards within him his unachieved work is defined forever by the frightful clearness of his last moments. If he had resigned himself, if he had begged for mercy, if he had adopted the views of the enemy, then *there would be nothing but being* and the order of causes would determine the order of ideas. If, on the other hand, he dies in a state of horror, when everything is achieved and explained, when it is demonstrated that the sequence of causes entailed no other conclusion and that nothing could have happened other than what did happen, there remains before our eyes something which prevents the synthesis from being completed: the death of the vanquished. Society cannot salvage this subjective death struggle, it cannot even attempt to regard it as a minor evil necessary to the advent of a greater Good, for a comparison of Good and Evil must be made within a single system and this closed consciousness is a system in itself. Its scales of value and its norms were not ours, and it shaped itself in accordance with them. Nobody can take upon himself that dead suffering, nobody can convince the departed that, all things considered, it was better that he suffered. Thus, this death, which, in a sense, is only an event of the world, seems to be a fixed and reproachful gaze which contemplates us. Beyond being there persists the affirmation of right; beyond every object appears a nonobjectifiable subjectivity which illuminates

the facts with its cold light. Haunted by the souls of those it has conquered, triumphant society will never close: it is shot through with holes. Death has saved the values by brilliantly manifesting their irreducibility. This irreducibility usually remains purely logical; it is boring. By virtue of failure, it is humanized and becomes tragedy. Inversely, the values redeem the death and even the birth of the vanquished through the well-known effect of retrospective illusion; the terminal defeat appears to us to be the meaning and supreme end of that lost life. One is born in order to lose; one is doomed, from childhood, to failure. Hence, death is a completion; delivered from its accidental aspect, it becomes the act of a subjectivity which is resorbed into the value that it posed. One of these two nothingnesses becomes embodied in the other. The historical, dated absence of the martyr, of the executed Communard, symbolizes the eternal absence of the values. The latter becomes the soul, the former the glorious body. By virtue of the failure, the value is historified without ceasing to be eternal; it is the subject's substance, and, through the final shipwreck, it surrenders to intuition its pure absence, in the sense that Simone Weil could say that the universal absence of God manifests His omnipresence. Thus, the vanquished wrests himself from the original contingency and becomes a *value-subject.* Society recovers this value-subject in an indirect way after a few years of purgatory and uses it to prove that *there is in being something other than being,* a residue that remains inexplicable when everything has been explained. In fact, the failure becomes the man's essence. A value, has, in fact, two contradictory exigencies: on the one hand, we must try to incorporate it into being, and, on the other, it requires that we situate it beyond any realization. The moral agent can satisfy this twofold exigency only, so it seems, by giving his life to realize the ethical imperative and by dying as a result of not having achieved his goal. Our social pantheon abounds in exemplary catastrophes. We pay homage to them and we bear adversity better because it seems to us that our own failures are magically involved in grandiose disasters.

But note: in order to find beauty in these historical failures, they must not, of necessity, be *our* failures. To be sure, all languages have a saying to the effect that there are defeats that are finer than victory. But who says that? The *others,* those who have no connection with the enterprise.* It is *the others* who prefer a dissatisfied Socrates to a contented pig. For if Socrates is dissatisfied with him-

* The vanquished sometimes say it, but they repeat, in order to conceal their anguish, out of vainglory, what they think the others will say of them.

self and with mankind, that means he is not so sure, in view of human folly and wickedness, that man is superior to the pig. Victims and vanquished are in agreement about preferring victory. Only a neutral, who is indifferent to the stake and perhaps to all stakes, can appreciate aesthetically the grandeur of a fine disaster.

But in the case of Genet, it is the failure that is the real object of his undertaking. He can therefore set himself up as the combatant who suffers the blows and as the neutral who judges them. His defeat astonishes and overwhelms him, but he claims that he has doomed himself to it since childhood. He throws himself wholeheartedly into his cause, but at the same time he views it only as a means of assuming an attitude. Although he is alive, he wants to see himself as society sees Vercingetorix, that is, as dead, vanquished and triumphant. He wants to be both the hand that stones him and the pious fingers that lay flowers on his grave. Submerged in a ghastly present, he leaps, at the same time, far into the future, turns to look at his dead life and finds it exemplary. He is himself and the Other, as always; and, as always, the Other is imaginary. At times, this Other, calm and detached, *appreciates,* through Genet's sufferings, his intransigent attitude, and at times it is the Other who suffers and it is Genet who, in a state of detachment, watches him suffer. In the former case, it is the victory which is feigned, and in the latter, it is the despair. Has he not written the following disturbing remark: "Grief and despair are possible only if there is a way out, whether visible or secret"? In short, despair—or absence of all hope—implies that hope remains. Or, if one prefers, hopelessness is its own hope. He creates the way out by himself; he is even the way out; and he knows it. He knows that he is being observed by an invisible witness who will come and lay his hand on Genet's brow and whisper gentle things to him: "You would not seek me if you had not found me."

Genet is a man-failure: he wills the impossible in order to be sure of being unable to achieve it and in order to derive from the tragic grandeur of this defeat the assurance that there is something other than the possible. When everything has been explained, when it has been proved that his defeat was inevitable, that the course of the world could not tolerate his undertaking, when the fact has closed in on him and swallowed him up, there remains an inexplicable residue, because he knew it all in advance, because he knew about his future failure in detail, he knew it by heart, and because he nevertheless willed the impossible. This means then that the impossible *is,* that the impossible came to tempt him in the very

depths of his heart, that man is impossible and is meant to will the impossible beyond the world of facts. At least that is what a fictive Genet whispers into the ear of the flesh-and-blood Genet. *We* know the truth: that he willed the impossible *so that* this phantom Genet would come and speak into his ear. We know it and we know that he knows it too. He is not dead; he is dreaming. He is dreaming that he is dead, lying in a coffin, and at the same time standing in the pulpit and delivering his own funeral oration. Everything is a mirage: his will to succeed, the cause he defends, his failure, his despair, his death and his victory. His deepest dream is not expressed by a parade of images or words. It is a certain nuance of his inner climate. He strives to live the present *in the past,* to perceive as one remembers. In his inner monologue he speaks of himself in the third person and in the past tense. Watching himself perform an act, he thinks: "He spun about." He relates to himself the events of his life, while they are unfolding, as if they were the episodes of a tragic story; he experiences them simultaneously in the *present,* in a state of despair, as victories of Nature, of Fact, of Matter, and in the *past* as the tragic triumph of the human.

Failure and betrayal are one and the same. As we have seen, betrayal is a will to failure. It means causing the joint enterprise of the criminal association to fail. But, reciprocally, the will to failure is a betrayal. To hurl oneself headlong into an action, into an attack, to involve others in the act and to keep hoping that it will all end in disaster, to undo every night, like Penelope, what one did during the day, to choose carefully the best devices and secretly to deprive them of their efficacy, to convert subtly all acts into gestures, is this not tantamount to betraying and to betraying *oneself?* Genet wants to do Evil, fails, decides to will his failure; whereupon he changes into a traitor, his acts change into gestures and being changes into appearance.* Now, the law of appearances and gestures is Beauty. We have got to the heart of this strange endeavor, in that secret place where Evil, engendering its own betrayal, is metamorphosed into Beauty. Evil, betrayal, failure, gestures, appearances, Beauty: this complex assemblage is the "tangle of snakes" which we have been seeking. Not quite: one snake is lacking. But here it is: it is Saintliness. It is born before our eyes.

Genet has willed Evil unto the failure of Evil, he has willed the impossibility of living unto the systematic destruction of his own life. He carries on relentlessly and, at the same time, watching him-

* At least he seeks a way out. I cannot say as much for Jaspers, whose intolerable chatter about failure is an act of studied humbug. Genet is a victim, Jaspers a charlatan.

self from the point of view of future generations, he sees in his shipwreck the proof that the Being of man is elsewhere, beyond his own nothingness. At an early stage, he threw himself into willing so that the action "might lead him to the possession of freedom," but he immediately pulled out of this action. He watches it and he meditates, with false detachment, on *the reverse of praxis*. To carry failure to the point of the destruction of everything, including Evil itself, is to betray. But from the point of view of the Other, of the absent and later witness, to betray to the point of despair, to the point of the self-denial that might be called abnegation, is *to be* a saint. When Evil was possible in his eyes, Genet did Evil in order to be wicked. Now that Evil proves impossible, Genet will do Evil in order to be a saint.

# "TO SUCCEED IN BEING ALL, STRIVE TO BE NOTHING IN ANYTHING"*

It did not occur to Genet all at once to become a saint or to give the name Saintliness to his longing to do harm. We have seen that as a child he dreamed of raising himself above men. Despite the frightful awakening, this dream has never left him. The source of the extraordinary paradoxes which we are going to discuss is to be found in the religious and archaic mentality that we have already described. Society defends itself against the tremendous powers latent in the universe, against the ambivalence of the "numinous," by means of custom, that is, by a body of observances. Inversely, infraction of the customary rules invests the offender with a sacred aura because it confers upon him the privilege of unloosing these powers. As a bastard and, later, a thief, Genet has been conscious since childhood of being sacred. If he dreams of asceticism in the time of his innocence, he does so, obscurely, in order to develop and exploit to his advantage the "numinous" power that emanates from him. Later, his will to do evil, the origin of which, as we have seen, is quite different, can easily be regarded by him as a form of asceticism. Since he wills his own misfortune and failure, since he relentlessly imposes upon himself distastes which his sensibility rejects, his attitude toward himself *resembles* that of the anchorite who makes a martyr of himself. Nietzsche has aptly said, in *Human, All Too Human:* "In every ascetic moral system, man addresses his prayer to a divinized part of himself, and it is consequently necessary that he diabolify the other part." Since the evildoer wills what horrifies him, he *sacrifices* himself to Evil, he realizes within himself the ascetic conflict. The mistreated child who claims to be the cause

* St. John of the Cross.

of his martyrdom will have no difficulty in regarding himself as an oblate.

Since we know that Genet believes in neither God nor the Devil, to whom, it may be asked, can he sacrifice himself? But, in its most primitive form, sacrifice is not addressed to any precise recipient. The sacrifice, says Gusdorf,* is "an action in accordance with the sacred." It is a "moment in the circulation of supernatural energy"; "in the operation of the sacrifice man can appropriate a part of the diffuse energy, but he can also attribute sacred force to beings external to himself." "This primitive sacrifice is carried out within a kind of concrete nebula, within a still undifferentiated religious bond." Nevertheless, the sacrifice is a gift. But it is a gift which is made to nobody. Genet makes a gift of himself to being, to the world, to destiny, to the sacred forces about him. And the purpose of this gift is to raise the donor to a higher potential of sacredness. Thus, without even thinking about it, Genet derives comfort from the obscure feeling that his misfortunes, his wounded self-esteem and even his misdeeds (since they cause him to suffer) increase his absolute value. This is certainly the deepest and most primitive view he has of his destiny. For him, the causality of suffering is sacred. It is on this foundation that he is going to build his theory of saintliness.

I am quite aware that his strange abuse of the "most beautiful word in the French language" has outraged more people than the accounts of his homosexual pleasures. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that his reasoning is specious. Viewed objectively, the thief and the saint resemble each other in that they consume without producing. To be sure, the effect of this unproductiveness is not to transform the saint into a crook, but it does, at times, enable the crook to pass for a saint. The saint deprives himself of everything, goes naked, eats roots; the most wretched slave is better fed, better clothed than he. I maintain, nevertheless, that the saint is a luxury flower that blossoms in the warmth of a particular sun, namely, the gold of the church. And if saintliness is defined objectively by the function it fulfills in a religious community, we shall see that Genet's betrayal performs a similar function in the society of crime.

### *1. Saintliness as a Social Fact*

The phenomenon of saintliness appears chiefly in societies of consumers. A full description of such societies would be beyond

* *L'Expérience humaine du sacrifice*, p. 51.

the scope of the present work. I shall mention only a few of their features: they confuse the essence and the practical purpose of the manufactured object; work is not creative, it has no value in itself, it is the inessential mediation that the merchandise chooses in order to move from potentiality to the act; a simple-minded practicality stresses the final aspect of the product; the truth of its being appears when it is presented to the purchaser or user as a polished, varnished, sparkling object; it is then revealed as both a thing in the world and as an exigency; it demands, *in its being,* that it be consumed. The work is merely a *preparation:* servants dress the bride; consumption is a nuptial union; as a ritual destruction of the "commodity"—instantaneous in the case of food products, slow and progressive in that of clothing and tools—it eternalizes the destroyed object, joins it in its essence and changes it into itself, and, at the same time, incorporates it symbolically into its owner in the form of a *quality.* It will be noted at once that this creative and valorizing destruction furnishes the pattern of the moral systems we have just been imagining: in the case of food, fullness of being emerges at the moment it melts in a mouth and releases its flavor; moment of death and life, paradox of the instant: though still objective, the taste is at the same time a subjectivity. And in like manner with regard to the criminal at the moment of his beheading: an exquisite food which is consumed before our eyes; and with regard to the saint, who is sucked by God like a piece of candy and feels himself deliciously melting into an infinite mouth. Not all who would be are consumers: ritual destructions are carried out by an elite. The function of this class has been well defined by an American economist as "conspicuous consumption." The aristocrat consumes for the entire society. The mob is allowed to watch the king eat; the king eats with tireless generosity; the common people proclaim their gratitude through the gates, a Mass is being performed. In order to qualify as a consumer, one must satisfy two requirements. First, one must be *born.* This means—among other things—that a slow and agelong adaptation of your family to the most exquisite products has formed your tastes in such a way that the object will develop, in your mouth, its full flavor, will be more richly itself than in any other mouth. Then, one must be a soldier: one has the right to possess what one acquires or keeps at the peril of one's life. In short, destruction gives the right to destroy: the hero, an exemplary figure in societies of consumers, chooses to be consumed on the field. While waiting for the ceremony, he is given the finest products to waste. The destruction of the destroyer will

complete the circle: his rich, spiced soul, tinted by wine, infused with the heaviest flavors, will delight the palate of the great Taster.

These strange communities pursue their own annihilation. The horrible bloodlettings practiced by the Aztecs and Toltecs in their own ranks led those people to their ruin, and it is known that the wasting of gold was one of the major causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. Thus, their chief virtue is the generosity of consumption which gives in order to destroy, and their great eschatological myth is universal conflagration, the "empyrosis" of the ancients. The members of the elite carry generosity to the point of absurdity. Each of them wants, like Nero, who burned Rome, to carry out his personal little empyrosis. "A chronicler," writes Marc Bloch, "has left us a report of the singular competition in waste that once took place at a great 'court' held in Limousin. One knight sowed a plowed field with silver coins; another burned tapers for the cooking of his food; a third, 'out of vainglory,' ordered that all his horses be burned alive."* The supreme refinement of consumption is to destroy the possession without enjoying it. Since the ultimate end of the commodity is to blossom at the moment of its death, the consumer lowers himself to the rank of an inessential means: the human species stands by and blissfully watches the goods which it has produced by the sweat of its brow or won at the risk of its life go up in smoke. But the aristocrat experiences at the same time the secret satisfaction of placing himself above the goods of this world. The crowd is not unaware that he is the source of this largesse, their applause is meant for him: he possesses eminently the goods which he destroys; to refuse enjoyment is the most exquisite enjoyment.

Christianity—which was born with the first emperors, triumphed over the Lower Empire and reigned over the feudal world—emanated from a society based on agriculture and war. The Church expressed, in its own way, the ideals of the Roman aristocracy and, later, of the feudal aristocracy. It proved its power by wasting human labor. Not that I wish to reproach the prelates for their display. I even recognize that most of the priests lived poorly. But behind this destitution can be discerned what Sorel has very aptly called an "idealistic economy."

"Authors of works of Christian archaeology inform us of the extraordinary luxury displayed in the Christian churches of the fourth century at a time when the Empire was so greatly in need of money. It was the stupid luxury of parvenus. The following are

* Marc Bloch, *La Société féodale,* Vol. II, Albin Michel.

a few examples: in the baptistery of the Lateran, a porphyry piscina, the inside of which was lined with silver; a gold lamb and seven silver stagheads spurting water; two silver statues, five feet high, weighing 190 pounds."* The best of human production goes up in smoke, becomes a gratuitous gift to nothing.† And if the priest dies of hunger in the shadow of a solid gold basilica, we thereby see all the more clearly his kinship with the knight who scattered silver over the fields. The church has borrowed from the aristocracy its generosity in consumption, and part of the aristocracy starts, in turn, to imitate the Church. Paulinus, son of a former prefect of Gaul, left the world after giving his wealth to the poor; Pammachius, after the death of his second wife, gave up his fortune and became a monk, though not without first inviting all the beggars of Rome to a feast. These ostentatious acts perpetuate the secular tradition of the Roman government. For a long time, the plebs had been the passive object of the emperor's largesse. The avowed aim of this liberality was not, as can be imagined, to lead this "lumpenproletariat" to participate in social and political life, but rather to divert it, to maintain it in its abjection. Similarly, individual acts of aristocratic generosity do not eliminate pauperism; they perpetuate it. It is the yawning chasm into which aristocrats throw their wealth, as the King of Thule threw his cup into the sea. The donor is quite aware that he will not enrich anyone; it is *for that reason* that he gives to beggars. He sells his land in order to ply the poor with drink, but it does not even occur to him to turn the land over to the peasants who farm it. Nor for a moment does he dream of helping small shopkeepers, of creating hospitals and free schools.‡ The acts of prodigality must *not profit*. One goes from the productive to the unproductive: land that yields a good return is converted into ready money. And from the highest potential to the lowest potential: a considerable amount is broken up into tiny quantities, each of which is barely sufficient to give a moment of physical joy to *one* poor person. Thus, charity is merely a pretext, and each of these acts of largesse, though it may overstimulate trade and impart to it an ephemeral appearance of health, concurs, by

* Sorel, *La Ruine du monde antique,* pp. 97-98.

† Even if the God of the Catholics existed, who can believe that He rejoiced when fierce priests made Mexican peasants sweat gold in order to coat the walls of churches? If He is omnipotent, this gift is ridiculously petty in comparison with what He can produce. "That's true," it may be answered, "but man gives what he can." In that case, it is the intention that counts. But then, if God is all love, how could He not be horrified by this gift which was extracted by force and cost such bitterness and suffering?

‡ It may be objected that initiative of this kind was hardly conceivable at the time. But that is exactly what I am saying.

virtue of its consequences, in dividing real property and increasing the drift of gold to the East, in short, in destroying civil society. The aristocratic ethic has taken on a religious aspect; it has been covered over with Christian myths and rites, but it has not changed in substance:* the consumer is God the Father; one gives, one destroys, "for the love of God," not for the love of the poor; the relinquishment is not to anyone's real benefit, it is accompanied by the public destruction of abandoned possessions, and as one takes credit for getting rid of them, this merit, which is recognized by everyone, is, as a consequence, the deep and manifest affirmation of the absolute right to property. As eminent owner of the goods which he spoils, the aristocrat raises himself above them as in the past. But the fact is that, from this new point of view, the elevation brings him closer to the Eternal Father: his act is confirmed by a heavenly judgment. Even the old myth of "empyrosis" enters the new religion unchanged under the name of "End of the World," "Reign of God," "Last Judgment." Later, when the Crusader, who is a sacred soldier, kills and gets killed for the Christian cause, when he offers up hecatombs of infidels to God, when he destroys, in huge potlatches, the possessions which they have amassed, the transformation is completed. At most, the merchandise becomes an idol: it *is produced* by workers from whom it is taken away in order to *be destroyed* ritually by idlers who do not enjoy it. To take an extreme situation, one can assume a secular society in its death throes: peasants working themselves to death so that aristocrats can die of hunger near burned crops. Of course, matters never reach such a point. Most of the rich will prefer to consume with enjoyment. Foreign wars will give the illusion of a constant renewal of possessions. Social movements, the infiltration of barbarians and then the appearance of a merchant class will modify the structure

* Christianity, which is a great syncretic current, has borne other ethics along with it. As a state religion, it has prescribed economy, temperance and wise administration of property for citizens of the middle classes. As a class religion, it preaches resignation to the lower classes. It addresses each individual in his own language. It convinces people that there is only one Christian ethic, which is the same for all. Its priests are shrewd enough to make the poor man believe that the resignation prescribed for him is basically of the same essence as the joyous renunciation of the aristocrats. In both cases, so he is told, one turns away from worldly goods. But it is easy to see that the abandoning of one's possessions is a princely act. It is to enjoy eminently. To renounce what one has not is to accept ignorance, hunger, servitude, in short, to accept being subhuman. If Genet can assert that the negative inhuman (being below man) joins the positive inhuman (rising above the human condition), it is because the Church brought about this confusion, and was the first to do so, by convincing the poor man that when he accepts his poverty he is performing *the same act* as the aristocrat who rejects his wealth. In this sense, *the Saint* has, in an aristocratic society, a mystifying function: his destitution is offered to the poor as an example and is falsely identified with theirs.

of the society. Finally, the aristocracy will ruin only itself; the progress of industry will transform consuming societies into producing societies. But the Saint, who is the fine flower of consuming societies, presents this aristocracy which is going to wrack and ruin with its most exact image. In him a whole community which is plunging into suicide finds what the Bishop of Nola proudly called his "folly," that is, his great funereal dream and his self-destructive generosity. His extreme destitution and lingering death are not even conceivable without the luxury and myths of a consuming society. In a society of the Soviet type, in which the supreme value is labor, other myths will operate, other rites, other hopes, and the members of the community will no longer be able to understand that blurred image of a bygone age: generosity of production, which *produces in order to give,* becomes the major virtue; the myth of the "end of the world" gives way to that of the creation of the world (death conquered, synthetic production of life, colonization of the stars); the Stakhanovite may very well work himself to death: it is not his death that will gain him credit, but his labor.

As for the hero and the saint, on the other hand, their only way of meriting social approval is to practice upon themselves the great, magnificent destruction which represents the ideal of their society. The hero comes first: no saint without a hero. The latter is not to be confused with the Chief; he does not win battles: he achieves by himself and at one fell swoop the glorious and sinister annihilation of a whole knighthood which is defeated by an enemy that is victorious but wonderstruck. The Saint internalizes this death and plays it in slow motion. In the beginning, he belongs to the military aristocracy: St. Martin, St. George, St. Ignatius, in our time Father de Foucauld, who is probably going to be canonized, are examples which show how easy it is to move from the military state to saintliness. In aristocratic societies, the professional soldier is an idler whom the community supports because he has sworn that he will die. He dies in every war. If he survives, it is a matter of chance or a miracle. As soon as he fights his first battle, he is, in effect, dead. The working classes produce implements of destruction for his use. He amasses them, he is the great master of destruction. It is he who ravages the enemy country and who decides, on occasion, to ravage his own, burning crops and towns before the victorious adversary. In consenting "to be no longer in the world," he places himself above all goods; they are all given to him, nothing is good enough for him. If some inner difficulty leads him away from war, he cannot come to life again; he must continue his death by some other

means. Thus, he sometimes chooses Saintliness. The Saint, too, is a dead man; though he is in this world, he is no longer of it. He does not produce, he does not consume; he began by offering up his wealth to God, but that is not enough. It is the entire world that he wants to offer; to offer, that is, to destroy in a magnificent potlatch.

Aristocrats have made gold useless by applying it to the walls of churches. The Saint makes the world useless, symbolically and in his person, because he refuses to use it. He dies of hunger amidst riches. But it is necessary that these riches exist: divers must seek pearls in the ocean beds; miners must extract gold from the bowels of the earth; hunters must, at the risk of their lives, break down the defenses of the elephant; slaves must build palaces, cooks must invent the rarest dishes, so that the Saint, rejecting royal dignity, ivory, precious stones and the beauty of women, may lie at death's door, barren and disdainful, heaped with *everything* because he accepts *nothing*. Then the world, abandoned, empty, rises up like a useless cathedral. Man has withdrawn from it and offered it to God. Later, when the Church has been firmly established, recruiting its highest dignitaries among the secular aristocracy, saints will be born of commoners. They are clerks who are driven by wild ambition to the highest offices and who find them occupied by nobles. Unable to be the first among men, they will want to be above the first; they will turn their eagerness against themselves, and, by a long, conspicuous suicide, they will give the society which is rushing delightfully to its destruction the exemplary image of proud annihilation. These clerks are fakers. By going through the ecclesiastical mill they could have obtained *something:* some honors, some money, some power. In pursuing Saintliness, it is therefore *something* which they are refusing. But by means of the transport they display in refusing, by means of the self-torture which they practice, they convince themselves and others that they have refused *everything*. And as public destruction involves a public and conspicuous assertion of titles to property, these poor wretches are the richest of men. Their guile has given them the world. There is a whole society to bear witness to the fact that they possess it. With these men appeared the sophistry of the Nay which later achieved such brilliant success; in a destructive society which places the blossoming of being at the moment of its annihilation, the Saint, making use of divine mediation, claims that a Nay carried to the extreme is necessarily transformed into a Yea. Extreme poverty is wealth, refusal is acceptance, the absence of God is the

dazzling manifestation of his presence, to live is to die, to die is to live, etc. One step further and we are back at the sophisms of Genet: sin is the yawning chasm of God. In going to the limit of nothingness one finds being, to love is to betray, etc. By a readily explicable paradox, this destructive logic is pleasing to conservatives because it is inoffensive. Abolishing *everything,* it touches *nothing.* Without efficacy, it is, at bottom, merely a kind of rhetoric. The course of the world will not be changed by a few faked states of soul, a few operations performed on language.*

Our society is ambiguous. Industrial development and the demands of an organized proletariat are transforming it, with horrible shocks, into a producing society. But the metamorphosis is far from complete. An oppressive class that is on the way out is mingling the old myths with the new. At times, it justifies its privileges by the excellence of its culture and taste, that is, by its aptitude for conserving. It claims to be the guardian of western values against the eastern democracies. At times, in order to meet the demands of the oppressed classes, it is willing to base property on labor, but it sets up a qualitative theory against the quantitative conception of the Marxists: it is entitled to possess more because of the superior quality of its labor. Meanwhile, the religion subsists, with its aging rites that it adapts to the new state of things as best it can. Everything is confused; the Church still canonizes, but listlessly; the faithful themselves have the vague feeling that the Saints belong to the past. In order to be sure that there will be a place for it in the forthcoming society, the Church has already begun to organize new groups and has launched the light cavalry of worker-priests in factories. I think, along with many others, that it is necessary to shorten the convulsions of a dying world, to help in the birth of a producing community and to try to draw up, with the workers and militants, the table of new values. That is why Saintliness, with its

* The mystics were highly skillful in the sophistry of the Nay. Here is St. John of the Cross:

"1. To succeed in tasting everything, strive to have no taste for anything.

"2. To succeed in knowing everything, strive to know nothing about anything.

"3. To succeed in possessing everything, strive to possess nothing of anything.

"4. To succeed in being all, strive to be nothing in anything. . . ."

Means of not preventing the whole:

"1. When you stop at something, you cease to abandon yourself.

"2. For in order to attain all, you must renounce all.

"3. And when you come to have all, you must have it without wanting anything."

And here is Meister Eckhart:

"As long as I am this or that or as I have this or that, I am not all things. Snatch yourself away so that you no longer are or have this or that, and you will be everywhere. Therefore, when you are neither this nor that, you are all things."

sophisms, rhetoric, and morose delectation repels me. It has only one use at the present time: to enable dishonest men to reason unsoundly.

But we have seen that a black aristocracy remains on the fringes of secular society. All the features of a feudal order are to be found in the knighthood of crime: parasitism, violence, potlatch, idleness and a taste for death, conspicuous destruction. All of them, even social conservatism, even religiosity, even anti-Semitism.* Amidst these soldiers Genet plays the role of a clerk: he is the only one who knows how to read, like the chaplain amidst the barons. Everyone who knows him is struck by the fact that he has the unction of a wicked priest. What can be more natural? He defends himself against violence by the traps of language. If he wants to convince guttersnipes, he has to utilize his unsoldierly qualities; he has to convince them that his preoccupations are of an order other than theirs; nor is it a bad thing that he is never quite present in their presence. If he is unobtrusive, he irritates them less; if he seems abstracted, he makes them feel uneasy; by an air of spirituality he shows that he has made himself the guardian of their values. Even his homosexuality is useful to him; he clothes himself in it as in a cassock. The rest comes automatically: as an ecclesiastical member of an outdated society, everything inclines him to indulge in the outdated game of Saintliness. And since his weakness and his intelligence make it impossible for him to be a tragic hero, he will internalize the destructive violence of the criminal. Living out the impossibility of living, he will be for these murderers the sacred image of their death. I know him as a beardless Landru, slightly formal in manner, always polite, frequently playful, in short a rather pleasant companion. But I readily imagine that he was a rather sinister figure in the feudal criminal world, often disliked and probably sacred: the hoodlums could read in his

* Genet is anti-Semitic. Or rather he plays at being so. As one can imagine, it is hard for him to support most of the theses of anti-Semitism. Deny the Jews political rights? But he doesn't give a rap about politics. Exclude them from the professions, forbid them to engage in business? That would amount to saying that is he unwilling to rob them, since businessmen are his victims. An anti-Semite who was defined by his unwillingness to rob Jews would be a curious anti-Semite indeed. Does he therefore want to kill them by the million? But massacres don't interest Genet; the murders of which he dreams are individual ones. What then? When cornered, he declares that he "couldn't go to bed with a Jew." Israel can sleep in peace.

I see only the following in his repugnance: as a victim of pogroms and age-old persecutions, the Jew appears as a martyr. His gentleness, humanism, endurance and sharp intelligence command our respect but cannot give him prestige in the eyes of Genet who, since he wants his lovers to be bullies, cannot be buggered by a victim. Genet is repelled by the Jews because he recognizes that he and they are both in the same situation.

eyes the dim reflection of their destiny; they felt, with indignation, that he was both a commoner and a churchman, the lowest amongst them, yet higher than the highest. The only way in which this little traitor, who might very well have been a soldier, can make a show of dignity is to become a black Saint, as Loyola, a cripple, became a white Saint. In a state of systematic transport, he will live, for all of them, their exile and their abasement; he will be, for all of them, the symbol of their idleness, of their wickedness, of their generosity. He will be a Saint because Saintliness is a function that awaits him; he will be the martyr of crime, in the double sense of victim and witness. For he differs from the criminal as the true Saint differs from the Hero: he transposes the military drama in terms of inner life.

### 2. *Saintliness as a Subjective Determination*

Although Saintliness, as an objective function, is a relatively simple fact, it becomes infinitely complicated when we consider it as a certain direction of the inner life. The hermit who endeavors to lead a godly existence is familiar with all the refinements of the dialectic of the Nay. In penetrating beneath this coarse envelope, we shall find in Genet the most exquisite religious culture.

The ascetic impulse is at the origin of an aristocratic ethic which has been expounded by Plato. We know the principle of *The Symposium:* the philosopher must die to his body in order to rise to the contemplation of the True and the Good. Let us interpret this to mean that we must renounce our particularity in order to attain the intuition of the Universal. The Christian consciousness will rediscover, through Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, the tradition of this renunciation and will call it Saintliness in those who carry it to the limit. Hegel has shown its workings in his description of the unhappy consciousness. Consciousness is *both* the immutable and the universal by virtue of its being pure thought, an abstract subject and *at the same time* this particular contingency, this man who was born of flesh, who appeared in a particular situation, who is immersed in the flow of development; but it does not know that it is the universal; it thinks that this abstract and eternal universality transcends it and that this universality is God. It therefore attempts, since it is ashamed of its singularity, to destroy the particular in itself in order to raise itself to Him. But the movement whereby its element of particularity attempts to destroy itself does not depart from historical particularity. It is a given desire,

at a given hour of a given day, that consciousness, in a given state of mind, will try, by a given means, to destroy; it will not escape unhappiness. It is this self-hatred that imparts to certain Christian mystical texts a tone which recalls the finest passages in Genet. We read, for example, in St. Theresa: "It is not sufficient to detach ourselves from those who are close to us if we do not detach ourselves from ourselves. . . . It is an arduous task to fight against our nature. We are so united with ourselves and we love ourselves very much . . . the first thing to do is to uproot the love of our body. . . . You came with the purpose of dying for Jesus Christ and not of treating yourself gently for Him. Let us strive to contradict our will in everything. . . . As soon as you are tempted, beg the Mother Superior to assign you to menial tasks, or do them voluntarily to the best of your ability. . . . Study ways and means of breaking your will in matters which are loathsome to it. . . . He who is truly humble must sincerely desire to be scorned, persecuted and condemned without reason, even in serious matters. Lord . . . give me the sincere desire to be scorned by all creatures." This wish to deserve universal scorn, this conflict of the will with the self, this firm intention not to live but to die one's life, evokes *The Thief's Journal;* and indeed the wily hoodlum counts on this resemblance to deserve the name of Saint. But let us not be misled by this family likeness; it conceals profound differences, not all of which are to the hoodlum's disadvantage.

Let us first note that a curious reversal has taken place since the advent of the bourgeoisie and that the ancient ethic of renunciation has been subdued to purposes which are the very opposite of the early ones. In a society based on agriculture and handicraft, it is the universal that must be conquered. But in our industrial and scientific world, we have it ready to hand: we find it in perception, in science, in technical and political action, in ethics. Indeed, the individual conquers himself as something beyond generality—and temporality as something beyond the eternal. A whole line of moralists and thinkers have used the ascetic method to attain the extreme particularity of the person. One must renounce the world and oneself, that is, the trivial, inauthentic, more than half universalized ego of daily practice, in order to make contact with oneself on the level of *pure exception.* This conception, which certainly colors present-day Christian mysticism and even the contemporary interpretation of ancient mysticism, leads philosophical minds to conceive the idea of existence in its early form, that is, as a reality which cannot be *pondered*—since all thought universalizes—but

only lived in silence.* In the writings of men of letters it will be the subject of an aesthetic transcription: Gide teaches us not to prefer ourselves, shows us Philoctetes abandoning his bow and his hatred, the prodigal son drawn to the desert by a desire for thirst and not slaking it, but at the same time he requires of Nathanaël that he become the most irreplaceable of beings. Thus, contemporary ascesis, far from giving birth, as in the case of the "unhappy consciousness," to the formal and hypostasized pure abstraction of the *I think,* displays the most ineffable individuality.

Genet remains equidistant from both these types of asceticism. And I would like to set beside him another present-day writer who resembles him in more ways than one and whose work confirmed him in his choice, namely Jouhandeau, the author of the *Treatise on Abjection.* Jouhandeau, a Christian and a homosexual, and Genet, a homosexual and a thief, have, from the very start, such a particular position, one in Catholic society and the other in secular society, that there can be no question of their wresting themselves from the universal. They were excluded from it from the outset. From the very beginning they were denied the right to be like everyone else. And as they both know that society will blame them eternally (in the case of Jouhandeau it is, in addition, the Eternal himself who condemns him), they are compressed in the historical moment. What they ask of the exercise of renunciation is therefore not that it lead them from the particular to the universal or from the universal to the particular, but that it enable them to achieve, by hostile destruction of the *suffered* and *given* particular, a *willed* particularity which is a law unto itself. Ascesis is here *re-creation.* One may find this surprising, for we are in the habit of conceiving creation as an affirmation, as a positive production, and it is difficult for us to understand how systematic self-destruction can result in the free production of self. But let us not forget that Jouhandeau's person and, particularly, Genet's are defined, at the outset, by privation. Exclusion, blame, condemnation, interdict, these are the great negative forces which constitute both of them from without. Jouhandeau writes the following, which could be signed by Genet:

"[I am] a victim of a lack of understanding, of a spontaneous aversion which in the end exiles me definitively. Certain people find my presence on earth suspect, and their hostile attitude thrusts me back into my secret. But nothing exalts me more surely than reprobation."

* I need hardly say that I am stating a case and not taking a stand. No ethic of the inhuman will have my approval.

In assuming, and with exaltation, the original factors of their situation, they will both be led to heighten the exile to which they have been condemned in order to be able to derive it from themselves. They will want to deserve the aversion of which they are the victims, and, since the movement which constitutes them from without aims at nothing less than to destroy them, they will have to espouse this movement, internalize it, direct it and continue it within themselves to the furthest limit. Thus, by an additional paradox, it is at the limit of annihilation that they will want to find the autonomous fullness of their being. Jouhandeau also says:

"Having reached the supreme degree beyond which one can no longer fall without ceasing at the same time to be, because there is no longer any possible access anywhere on that side for anyone or anything, because there is no lower place for being—I mean because being would cease to be there at the same time that it proceeded further; as it is impossible for me to cease to be, I necessarily stop."

From this point onward, it is the very movement of renunciation that is going to be reversed: St. Theresa, on the one hand, and Nietzsche and Gide, on the other, have something in common, despite the radical opposition of their ends, to wit, that the movement of their ascesis is upward: in Jouhandeau and Genet, this movement is downward. St. Theresa, Nietzsche and Gide, rising above the goods which they reject, preserve them eminently; whereas Jouhandeau and Genet sink *below* the possessions of which they strip themselves and actually lose them. The ascension of St. Theresa, Nietzsche and Gide is ideal. It takes place mentally, with the result that their operation is reversible. The descent of the others is real and is characterized by irreversibility.

Indeed, if we consider ascetic renunciation in St. Theresa or Plato, it is clear that the aim of the mystic and the philosopher is to renounce only nothingness, that is, the consequences of their finiteness. If one gets free of the shadows of the cave, it is in order to see things truly. In their perfection and universality, Platonic Ideas contain all Being and, insofar as the vain appearances of the physical world have any reality, they have received it from the intelligible world. Similarly, for St. Theresa the modicum of reality contained in love of creatures comes to her from the infinite love which we bear God through them; to renounce the former love is to reveal the latter in its radiant purity. Christian Saintliness is a negation of negation. It rejects only that part of ourself which comes only from us, that is, from our nothingness: error and passions. And for it, as for Hegel, the negation of negation bursts

our limits and becomes an affirmation. At the end of the renunciation there remains only being, absolute positivity without any negative counterpart, that is, the creature insofar as he relates to God alone.

From a quite other point of view, it is also nothingness that Gide wishes to expel from himself. If he advises us not to linger over enjoyment, it is because protracted enjoyment diverts from everything; if he urges us to renounce our belongings, it is because the possessed object eventually possesses its possessor and shapes him in its image; if, in *Paludes,* he ridicules busy men who throw themselves into activities, it is because the latter, in sacrificing the present to the future and substance to shadow, make Nonbeing the supreme end of Being. God is all, He is everywhere, the totality of being should be perceived in each individual thing; the owner is defined, amidst his family and activities, by a *common* relationship (occupation, family ties, property) with *particular* objects. On the other hand, in order to become the most irreplaceable of beings, one must renounce the particular in order to become an *individual* relationship to the *totality* of the real. If he advises us to "separate the instants," it is in order to make each of them a "totality of isolated joy." Gide's instant is paradoxical in that it joins, in an intuition, the ineffable individuality of the subject to the pantheistic totality of the object.

In all these ascetics, the destruction of goods is carried out by a consciousness which retains them in their quintessential form in and by its destruction of them. I have explained elsewhere that the *gift* is actually the best way of fulfilling ourself as owner. In divesting ourselves of the object, we place ourselves above it, but by the act of giving we assert that it is ours, since we can give only what belongs to us. Consciousness renounces its connections with *this* article of furniture, *this* house, *this* family, but it consequently defines itself by means of these very acts of renunciation. Everything is restored to it inwardly and freely since it apprehends itself as the synthetic unity of these rejections. It will henceforth be free—depending on the point of view it adopts—to see within itself the challenging of the particular by the universal and of the finite by the infinite or the historical individuality of an ascesis. This presupposes, of course, indefinite progress, for, whatever the penury we have attained, we must free ourselves from it by a more rigorous penury. One "surmounts oneself"; the unity of absolute simplicity (we are nothing but the negation in act of everything) and of infinite wealth (since it is precisely the concrete all which is the

object of the rejection) is the ideal conclusion of this infinite movement. In short, it is Hegel who has revealed to us the secret of ascetic ethics: transcendence preserves what it rejects.

However, there is in this destitution something which one does not touch: the Other's esteem. No doubt one seeks contempt, one arouses indignation, or, at least, one is not afraid of it. The fact remains that St. Theresa is supported by divine approval. Her fellow citizens may cast stones at her: it is in God's presence that she fights against herself. As for the moralists, they are sure of winning their trial on appeal. Nietzsche, unappreciated by his contemporaries, is convinced that posterity will erect statues to him. It is striking that Gide has shown Ulysses, the man of action, the politician, admiring the gesture of Philoctetes. The reason is that the divesting takes place in the direction of the metaphysical hierarchy. Plato goes from shadows to images and from images to things; St. Theresa, from the contingent to the necessary; Gide, from the particular to the totality. And the indubitable sign of this conformity, the moral evidence, is the happiness or joy that accompanies renunciation. There is a happiness of the Sage who contemplates the order of the world, a happiness of the Saint who is visited by her god, a happiness of Abraham returning to the world, a Nietzschean joy, an intoxication of Philoctetes whom Nature suddenly showers with her gifts. When one requires nothing more of the world, it gives itself, because the positive is always attained in the negation.

In Jouhandeau and Genet, on the other hand, the ascesis takes place in the opposite direction of the metaphysical hierarchy, that is, *in the direction of lesser being*. Being serves as a springboard for leaping toward Nothingness. To renounce human love for the love of God is to find all the being of the former in the latter. One does not cease to love the creature: one loves him in God. Cured of its deviation, purged of its nothingness, firmly applied to its sole real object, love is an opening on the All, it is all loves in a single love, the infinitude of my finiteness and the plenitude of my emptiness. But if Jouhandeau renounces love of God for that of men, the result for him is a dead loss; and if Genet renounces love of men for the lure of gain, he hardens, desiccates, withers up his feelings, attempts to incline them toward beings lower and lower in the metaphysical hierarchy and consequently less and less lovable, attempts to increase the portion of nothingness and shadow within them. We have already seen the example, comic in its abstractness, that Genet gives of this downward ascesis: he denounces his best friend and is

paid off in his presence. I don't believe it: Genet's betrayals are more commonplace, less grave; the element of humor and weakness or of fear in them is greater than he cares to say. But, in any case, what he proposes to himself is the ideal, and that is enough for us to view him without laughing. *Therefore,* he destroys himself in a person's heart. That heart was his sole refuge; he dwelt within it, heedless of public rumor, truly pure. A gesture, three words: "There he is!" and he commits suicide in that bewildered heart. Truth, suddenly stirred within that foreign consciousness by an evil intention, becomes error, just as our certainty of having seen the seven of diamonds in the conjuror's left hand sometimes changes into a dream. Genet and the conjurors have in common the fact that their function is to produce the twilight moment in which our conviction, without losing its blinding evidence, already seems evidently false to us; in order to occasion this hesitation in people's minds, they trick them from a distance. Genet's art, in particular, is, as we shall see, a betrayal. But in the case with which we are concerned at present, to betray is to decide in favor of all against a single individual: Genet is jealous of the other's individuality and of his own individuality in the other's heart. What if the Button Molder of souls were right? What if the value of certain souls were due to the irreplaceable love which they have had the luck to inspire? What if Solveig, killing two birds with one stone, secured Peer Gynt's salvation and her own as well? What if Genet were going to be saved in spite of himself? What if the friend, that third knife, suddenly proved to be the true star of the melodrama? None of that! Rather than let himself be redeemed by another, Genet will ruin himself by his own devices; he will ensure his individuality all by himself. His misfortune and pride allow him to have no commerce other than with all: he is only the empty form of the particular in the presence of the universal, and he establishes himself permanently as a particular by rejection of the universal. What business has he with the mediation of someone else? Where does that friend think he gets the right to love him? Since he intends to distinguish himself by loving the monstrous object of public hatred, Genet will put him in his place by changing his love to hatred. As soon as he is back among the mob, he will again become what he should never have ceased to be: *one* among *all.* "*Who* are you to place your trust in me?" Genet asks him angrily. "What right have you, you noble soul, to tempt me with the Good?" He gets what was coming to him: systematically practiced trust is an educator's trap. To *trust* may be a fine thing. But to *place* one's

trust—what outrageous mistrust! It's a cunning mortgage on the future. Against my future freedom, that undesirable, each defends himself as best he can, I by oaths, the other by protesting his trust. No sooner is it flaunted than it clings to me, it's a guardian angel, a cop, a chastity belt. But, it may be objected, Genet's friend *trusted.* Perhaps. But for the damned, trusting and placing one's trust are one and the same: wherever it comes from, that holy water burns them when they are sprinkled with it. Because it is a temptation by Good it is automatically transformed into a temptation by Evil. In short, it is ruined and the friend is locked up. That sweet and kind Genet was a fake Genet. But for Genet himself, the good Genet was a reality: he loved, he was glad to be helpful; through his contact with that affectionate soul he discovered in it the Other that he *also* was for a single Other: a faithful friend. He trusted *himself* through the other's trust, and it was nice indeed. He will destroy for himself that objective and secret Genet; he will renounce happiness, security. Fouché is said to have been a good husband and father; Himmler, to have loved birds. These hard, false men whose job was to harm allowed themselves occasionally to be relieved of their functions by a child, by a pet. Genet would have had his own wife and brats thrown into jail, he would have roasted and eaten the canary. No rest for the wicked. He must feel in his bones the staggering astonishment of his victim. Actually, Genet is even more mystified by the trick. The fact is that when the other thinks he has seen the light he is still mistaken: he imagines that Genet merely pretended to love him and turned him in for money. Genet, who is better informed, knows that he loved him, that he got paid in order to have a motive for betraying. Where is the appearance? Where is the sham? Was he pretending to love? Is he not rather pretending to betray? Not at all: the betrayal is real since the friend is in prison. But what is a *real* traitor: is he a false friend or a sincere friend who destroys his love—and who is all the more criminal in that he loved more sincerely? Here begin the self-tortures, and I do not mean only the privations that he inflicts upon himself. To be sure, he will never see his friend again, he will never hear him again. He deprives himself of the happiness of being loved, he makes himself unworthy of it. But that's not the worst: for he betrayed *in order to be unworthy of loving.* The future monk who separates from his family, the sad Dominique who sighingly renounces the melancholy object of his passion, can still love; in fact they do love. And when Kierkegaard takes leave of Regina, he takes pleasure in thinking that she is restored to him in her

entirety. But Genet loses his faculty of loving: he no longer understands his love, his offense separates him from it, he sees it from the heart of his darkness as a light that dazzles him without illuminating him. Tender emotions rise up in him like bubbles, but only to burst immediately: when Genet the friend wants, despite himself, to see his friend again, Genet the traitor is frightened and thinks only of fleeing his victim's vengeance. The first impulse engenders the second, which cancels it. Moreover, hatred arouses hatred: from within his tenderness Genet sees emerging a hatred directly *induced* by that which he has deliberately provoked in the other. The stronger his impulse, the more bitter is his resentment in knowing that he is rejected and the more violent his hostility toward the other; love is constantly being reborn from its ashes and reviving the hatred that kills it. In the depths of certain loves there is a temptation to betray which issues from the love itself, a temptation which is a pure negativity, a dizziness in the presence of the void and the nay, a temptation which awakens and grows all the more restless in that the love is stronger. Love seeks, at one and the same time, to maintain itself, test itself, transcend itself and destroy itself.* Betrayal offers itself as a deliverance, but one delivers oneself from love only by falling below all love. A single betrayal, even if secret, makes *all* friendship impossible. For a friendship is born with a future of friendship. The friendships which Genet strikes up in the underworld† are nipped in the bud by a future of hatred; in the first smile of trust on the other's face he already reads the sneer of future contempt. Friendship, which is a pledge, a continuous line of conduct, breaks down into bitter little bursts of nervous sympathy because the pledge to love is canceled by the pledge to hate, and yet this spray of emotions calls for a unity which is rejected. Loving *all* in God, St. Theresa feels less and less the desire to attach herself to *a* creature. On the other hand, as one descends lower and lower into hell, the need to love burns more intensely. All loves are there, past and future, but as *privation*. Genet continues to be haunted by the inexhaustible richness of the world; he feels pain in the arm he has lost. He wants *All* to be for him an incurable wound. Saintliness thinks it will rise to the plane of

* Janet asked a patient who was obsessed by the temptation to murder her children, "Why your children? Why not your husband?" "Ah," she replied, "it's because I don't love him enough."

† For it is only in the underworld that he betrays. The friends he has recently made (bourgeois members of the French intelligentsia) he defends—at times even when it is dangerous to do so—with a warmth extremely rare in literary circles. I know some persons for whom he no longer cares but whom be continues to stand by.

supreme being, for the Saint has not cast off the illusion that fullness of being is contained in intelligible realities: the Gidian ethic thinks that people receive in the instant the detailed and infinite gift of all that exists. But Genet descends to the abstract. The love he bears *a* creature may seem to saints and moralists a deviation and limitation of true love: for him it is the only way of attaining the concrete.* Betrayal, on the other hand, is a withdrawing into oneself, a renunciation, and as he betrays in order *to conform in every case* to his general will to do evil, treason is, for him, a return to the order of Evil. In betraying he suppresses the actual exception in order to remain the abstract will to be the pure, categorical exception to the rule. To betray is to apply in reverse the most abstract of ethics, that of the Kantian imperative. The maxim which he has laid down for himself, the rule which he observes in order to escape the rule, might be expressed as follows: "Act in such a way that you always treat mankind in your person and in the person of others as a means and never as an end." As Camus has admirably said in *The Plague*, pain is abstract. One will therefore readily understand that Evil is the systematic substitution of the abstract for the concrete.

The comparison with the author of the *Treatise on Abjection* will enlighten us if we carry it far enough, for we find the same impulse in Jouhandeau. He, however, has chosen the concrete of the saints, God himself; and it is God whom he betrays. No doubt he draws his accomplices into damnation. "I pursued X obstinately. I found him, disturbed him, cast a spell on him. By dint of malefices, I made a monster of him. . . . It is to me that he owes his downfall, his irreparable perversity. . . . Even if I save myself, I shall have destroyed him." But he merely gives to the other the purity in Evil which he is seeking for himself; he destroys him without ceasing to love him or to want his love. He "loves beings as God loves them"; he sacrifices everything to them: "What does it matter to me that you are Nothingness and that I sacrifice everything to you?" He thereby reconstitutes a society of three: "Closed Trinity: God, he and I." But God represents the victim in this community, and betrayal results from the creature's using against God the Being that comes to him from God alone. The freedom which Jouhandeau has received for Good he will use for Evil: "If I am freedom, the freedom to love Man more than God and more

* Although, as we have seen, he seeks the type, the imaginary essence, the general theme of crime in the hoodlums he loves. Cut off from nature and from his own body, Genet is abstract.

than myself, who can take it away from me, even if it dishonors me and ruins me eternally . . . ?"

It is a matter of wresting oneself from God, of settling into one's own finiteness and, since a servant of God is no longer anything but God himself, of engendering from nothingness a will to annihilation and becoming a twilight being, a movement toward Nothing. Since error and Evil, as Descartes has shown, come from the creature, he who becomes all error and all evil derives only from himself. Every undertaking is aimed only at denying increasingly the being which he is through the omnipotence of God: "Great progress has been made when one no longer has any consideration or pity for oneself." Since the Positive is God within him, since only the *limit* comes from him, he will become a limit: "It is my own limits, those which God imposes upon me, which deliver me." He delivers himself little by little from God; he systematically rids himself of "whatever was exigent and sublime in his desire," unlike St. Theresa who retains the quintessence of hers. He disappears into a darkness which the divine gaze cannot pierce: "Each soul's relations with itself are—from a certain point of view peculiar to the soul—not quite God's concern nor do they concern any other soul in any way. That is the great secret." These relationships are those of finiteness with itself, of the negative with the negative. God, who is all-positivity, an infinite being and infinitely being, is blinded by His omnipotence: He perceives the creature only insofar as it is a positivity. In order for the divine understanding to conceive the negative, it would, to a certain degree, have to be affected with negativity. Thus, the nothingness which is secreted by the creature is a veil that hides it from the sight of the Almighty, like the ink in which the cuttlefish envelops itself. It is into Nothingness that the creature draws those whom it loves because it wants to love them for their nothingness and for their finiteness. The hapless couple takes refuge at the confines of being, in error and evil: on this level, it exists through itself and without divine mediation. It creates the purely human in absolute immanence, in sacrilegious rejection of transcendence. It is "the infernal kiss that Nothingness gives Nothingness." But it is also: "Man end of man. . . . My obsession, my perpetual temptation, my sin, is man. . . . Man alone satisfies man. God transcends him." A strange humanism, the humanism of a Black Mass, which starts by posing the divine's infinite superiority to the human in order subsequently to affirm, in a state of terror, man alone against God. "The human is the human and the place of the human; the place of the Pure and

Absolute human is Hell." Hidden beneath his flaunting of vice, beneath his hatreds, almost imperceptible, we would find in Genet —and in many other homosexuals—an analogous humanism, a barren humanism of pure immanence. A hellish humanism. Jouhandeau loves man in defiance of divine transcendence, and Genet loves him in defiance of ethical and social transcendence. Heroically minded authors are fond of showing enemy soldiers who attain, over and above the conflict that sets them against each other, a kind of solidarity and mutual respect. In a moment they will resume the fight, but there is a truce: they rise above the causes which they are defending; within them transcendence goes beyond every possible end to be recognized as pure transcendence, as the agony and grandeur of man. Genet succeeds in giving an infernal image of this lofty reconciliation: far from outstripping values, he takes a resolute stand at a point short of the ethical world and of all loyalties. At the beginning of *Funeral Rites,* the reader is mystified: in the impulse of love that drives Genet, a Frenchman, toward Erik, a German soldier who has perhaps killed his lover ("Was it possible for me, without doing violence to my inner life, to accept one of those against whom Jean had fought to the death?"), he thinks that he will experience some of the grandeur ("Fortinbras has my dying voice") which prevails in literature at the reconciliation of soldiers. But this is an illusion. In actual fact, Genet refuses to judge according to *acts.* If he loves the man, he does so without regard to praxis, on the level of gesture, and he is as indifferent to the cause of Jean, who was a Communist and a member of the Resistance, as he is to that of Erik, who is a member of the occupying forces and a Nazi. Moreover, the optimistic generosity of the soldier which defines man by formal transcendency is akin to the pessimistic good will of the whore for whom all men and all causes add up to the same thing. Whether stated in the manner of the former ("We are alike. The ideal doesn't matter as long as you *have* an ideal. It's the will to sacrifice that counts.") or of the latter ("Men are all alike. They get drunk on big words and reach for the moon. Communists, Nazis, it's all the same hokum."), the result is the same: a betrayal in the moment. We are not angels and we do not have the right to "understand" our enemies, we do not yet have the right to love *all* men. The fact remains that in Genet as in Jouhandeau the pessimism of immanence leads to a kind of humanism exactly as does formal transcendency. But the fact is, they cannot hold to that. Genet falls headlong and shoots like a meteor through that thin film of humanism: he is going to betray the friend whom he loves,

despite transcendency. Jouhandeau sighs: "Image of man, how beautiful you would be if I could keep you. . . . I renounce you because you escape me on all sides. There is no possessing you. . . ." In other words, to use the language of Jean Wahl, rejection of trans-ascendence necessarily produces trans-descendence. For man holds his ground only by surpassing himself, in the same sense in which it is said that one ceases to love if one does not love increasingly every day. If he is pious, he surpasses himself toward his creator; if he is an atheist, toward the God he wants to be. Jouhandeau surpasses himself downward, toward the mineral. The kinship of the two traitors—the one who betrays God and the one who betrays men—is marked by the similarity of the images they invent: "To him alone," writes Genet, "was granted the fearful privilege of perceiving his monstrous participation in the kingdoms of the great muddy rivers and of the jungles." And Jouhandeau: "Having become an unclean animal and then a bog plant, adapted to the folds of a shameful sinuosity of Hell, you were for a moment less than that: protoplasm." In both cases they go back down the road that led from the protozoa to man. But the aim is not to achieve this simplification for its own sake. The protozoan interests our traitors only in that it is *below,* at the lowest degree of the scale. Furthermore, they are not interested in *being* at the bottom; they must *have arrived there.* The protoplasm to which they want to reduce themselves is not the explosive substance, pregnant with the whole future of living things, which was the starting point of creative evolution: it is the final end of an involution that remains haunted by the memory of the great complex forms—fish, bird, man—which it was and which it cannot become again or even quite understand. One suspects that simplicity in evil does not tempt these homosexuals and poets for its own sake, but only insofar as it is a conscious privation of complexity. Each of their transgressions effects a disintegration, breaks up a synthesis and replaces it by a vertical contradiction, one of whose terms, which is real, which is actually experienced, is given as a simplification, and the other of which is an absence. But it is the absence which is stressed in this fake simplicity. The sage wants to be simple in order to reconcile himself with himself, and our sinners, on the other hand, in order to kindle the conflicts with themselves.

It is then that Genet turns proudly to the recognized Saint to ask him: Which of us two experiences veritable privation? Jouhandeau had already drawn a parallel between the Saint and the sinner:

"Just as the Saint renounces, first, Evil, then the society of men

and finally everything in himself that is not Virtue, in order to be attached only to God through contemplation and the practice of a perfect life until he himself is only Nothingness and until God alone is all to him, so the determined sinner renounces Good, Society and, in Society, esteem and honor, and finally himself and in himself everything that is not his sin in order to be attached, first through desire and then in act, only to his object, by turning everything to the triumph of his perversity until he is only Nothingness in himself and his evil the All Evil."

The canonized Saint used his negative freedom to destroy his limit; there remains in him only Being, that is, God. The sinner, on the other hand, uses being to intensify the existence of his limit as a bleeding wound; he wants to be nothing other than the limit of being; hence, all Being falls outside him. But we must conclude from this that the Saint's destitution exists only in the eyes of others: he has everything, God is with him, how could he suffer? And although the possessions and pleasures which he has abandoned may return at times to haunt him, he does not have great difficulty in resisting the temptation since all the positive powers are on his side. Whereas the privation of Jouhandeau and Genet, even if it is not always visible, is felt. A comparison of the following three texts is to the advantage of the sinner.

First, St. Theresa:

"He who is truly humble must sincerely desire to be scorned, persecuted and condemned without a reason, even in grave matters. . . . *What is very helpful is to consider . . . that we are never accused without a reason, for we are always full of faults.*"

Then Jouhandeau:

"Happiness of being an object of derision and contempt for the only man in whom I have placed my trust. . . . Happiness of having no more friends. . . . Happiness of having no more relatives. . . . Happiness of the impure. To be publicly insulted and scorned is a revelation. We make the acquaintance of certain words which hitherto were only appurtenances of tragedy and with which we suddenly find ourselves rigged out and weighed down. We are perhaps no longer the person we thought we were. We are no longer the person we knew, but the one whom others think they know, whom they think they recognize as such-and-such. *If anyone could have thought that of me, it means that there is a certain amount of truth in it. . . .*"*

Lastly, Genet:

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* *Treatise on Abjection.*

"In order to weather my desolation . . . I worked out, without meaning to, a rigorous discipline: . . . to every accusation brought against me, unjust though it be, from the bottom of my heart I shall answer yes. . . . I owned to being the coward, traitor, thief and fairy they saw in me. An accusation may be brought without proof, but it will seem that in order to be found guilty I must have committed the acts which make traitors, thieves or cowards; but this was not at all the case: *within myself, with a little patience, I discovered, through reflection, adequate reasons for being named by these names.* And it staggered me to know that I was composed of impurities. I became abject."

The canonized Saint, the Sinner and the diabolical Saint all demand that they be arraigned and blamed for acts which they have not committed. And all three immediately declare that the inner essence of their hearts fully justifies this arraignment and blame. It will therefore seem that we are dealing, in the three cases, with the concerted practice of humility. But this is not so: it is the sinners who are running the entire risk; the Saint is shamming. And of the three it is Genet who risks most.

In the case of St. Theresa, the starting point is *general esteem.* No doubt she struggled, she was misunderstood, she sometimes shocked, but, after all, the leading theologians were always on her side. Her superiors almost always supported her, particularly between 1562 and 1567 when all Avila violently objected to her "reform." The text which we have quoted, far from being an extract from some confession, appears in *The Way of Perfection,* a work of moral instruction written at the request of her nuns and at the recommendation of her confessor. It is true that she wishes to be scorned, but the wish is quite Platonic since she is careful to write in the same paragraph: "I was unable to put myself to this test in important matters. When I did hear people speak ill of me, I always realized that they reproached me very little." Moreover, what is involved here is a rather particular humility, since she no doubt renounces men's esteem, but continues to deserve it. In point of fact, it is clearly specified that the accusations are *false,* as is attested by the continuation of the passage: "Even if embarrassment were the only advantage for the person who accused you falsely, if he sees that you let yourself be condemned unjustly, it would be enormous." Humility consists therefore in placing oneself *above* the judgment of men. One does not even deign to defend oneself; one accepts slander passively and already knows that this behavior is *exemplary,* that it even has an edifying value for others. The

slanderer's embarrassment is a tribute to his victim and greatly resembles Ulysses' involuntary admiration for Philoctetes. One has risen above him, one draws him to God. St. Theresa is careful to tell us that this embarrassment "sometimes elevates the soul more than ten sermons." Thus, the slanderer is not at all an equal or superior whose scorn crushes us because it reveals to us the truth of our being-for-others; on the contrary, he is below us, and his scorn is a sin that falls on him without affecting us. At bottom, this would-be quest of scorn is rather a certain way of placing oneself above all esteem, because a contingent and finite creature cannot rightly evaluate another creature: "What can it profit us to satisfy creatures?" All that counts is valorization by the Almighty: "Even if all [creatures] imputed a host of faults to us, what does it matter if we are exempt from them in the eyes of the Lord . . . ?" What a cry of pride! At bottom, one deliberately challenges the natural witness—our fellow man—in order to substitute for him the only witness worthy of us, the Almighty. No intermediary between the soul and the infinite. The creature rejects all solidarity with creatures. To be sure, she is humble before God, but this humility costs little. How could finiteness not grovel before the infinite? Especially if the groveling is to raise it above the judgment of men? True humility, the humility that is agonizing, is to recognize that one is inferior to another finite creature. St. Theresa does, of course, declare in the aforementioned passage that we must "consider that we are never accused without a reason, for we are always full of faults." But what does she mean by that? That she has really committed the sins imputed to her? That she might have committed them? No, but that, in a quite general way, she is a sinner because God shaped her of clay, because she is a limited, contingent creature, composed partly of nothingness. This amounts to saying that she is not God. Scorn and slander are an opportunity for her to relate to God as to the measure of all things and to feel again her infinite smallness. But she does not deign to relate to any human creature because she does not accept man's being the measure of man. Indeed, she adds: "The just man falls seven times a day, and it would be untrue to assert that we are without sin. That is why, although we may be wrongly accused, we are never exempt from faults as was good Jesus." Of course, but Jesus is God himself, and our fundamental guilt does not prevent us, if we are strong enough, from being the Just man or the Saint, that is, the best among men. Furthermore, in order to promote detachment, it is not enough for her to set the testimony of God himself against the human witness:

she adds that one must want to be scorned *with* the Lord. It is God himself whom she takes as companion in abjection: "Could I desire that one ever speak well of a creature as wicked as I when one speaks so ill of You, O Good above all goods?" Whereupon contempt is destroyed by itself. What importance are we to grant it, since it is so ridiculous as to address itself to God too? In fact, since it was the Lord's will to allow himself to be scorned, disdain and condemnation honor us by fashioning us in His likeness. They must be sought as merits. And it is not surprising that humility, conceived at first as a suffering to be borne, changes with practice into pure indifference: "[The practiced soul] is no longer concerned with one's speaking ill or well of it; it feels that such talk is of a matter which is foreign to it." But is not this indifference to other people's judgment one of the characteristics of pride? Human scorn concerns appearance; the judgment of God concerns Being. Thus, the saint's humility is quite simply a preference for Being. Behind the sincere effort of self-renunciation made by the unhappy consciousness is an ethical optimism: it suffices that an absolute gaze penetrates us for us ourself to be valorized absolutely. Thus, ascetic elevation is true, but humility and privation are false. It is always a matter of existing in the eyes of Another and, consequently, of being for oneself other than self. Humility consists in choosing the Other in whose eyes one exists and, as a consequence, the Other that one is for oneself.

In Jouhandeau, we find the same duality of witnesses: there is God and there are all men. However, it is impossible for him to use one of the two testimonies to challenge the validity of the other because the two witnesses make the same statement: "Insult is perpetual. It is not only explicit, in the mouth of this one or that one, but on the lips of all who name me; it is in 'being' itself, in my being . . . and it is God in person who utters it . . . who eternally gives me that execrable name. . . ." For St. Theresa, the human judge attained only appearance, God alone saw being: one could therefore withdraw into being. But for Jouhandeau, the human gaze also attains him in his being. There is no longer any refuge, and humility before God becomes abjection before men. St. Theresa annihilates herself before God, but this annihilation raises her above the creature. It is *before the creature* that Jouhandeau annihilates himself: he is, like St. Theresa, a pismire in the eyes of God, but he is also a miserable wretch in the eyes of his fellows. When he cries out: "Happiness of being an object of derision and contempt for the only man in whom I have placed my trust," he

uses the same or almost the same words as St. Theresa, but in his mouth they have a different ring: "I am always more pleased," admits the Saint, "that supposed faults are imputed to me rather than real faults." But it is *real* faults that are imputed to Jouhandeau. We are thus confronted with a strange paradox: the Saint must want to sin as little as possible, but he must also have, in the words of St. Theresa, "the sincere desire to be scorned by all creatures." Now, these two postulations are contradictory: if he scorns scorn, he cannot *desire* it, and if he desires it, he must want to deserve it. But he can deserve it only by *a fault,* and that is what he cannot will, for that would be to sin against God out of love of God. Jouhandeau, on the other hand, wants to play the dangerous game of betraying God out of love. It is because of his faults that he brings contempt upon himself, and he first recognizes that he deserves the slurs which are cast upon him. He thereby knows true humility. But he sins, and if he wants the scorn to continue, he must persevere in Evil: "Happiness of being disfigured by Evil, by one's own evil. One can no longer show oneself, or one shows one's evil, and that is a kind of emblem, a badge, a sign, the white robe of madness or the bell of the leper." There is no true destitution unless one regrets having given up one's possessions. In the case of the Saint who renounces the goods of this world in order to acquire those of heaven, this regret gradually diminishes and ends by giving way to beatitude. In order to regret having given something away, one must lose by the exchange, one must have less, be worth less, one must *go down.* In renouncing "what was exigent and sublime in his desire," Jouhandeau thinks he has acquired the right to say that "these sacrileges are perhaps a manner of sacrifice." The sinner has thus chosen the greatest sacrifice, since he lets himself sink into Hell, and the greatest risk, since he does not see, once he is there, how he can get out of it. However, let there be no misunderstanding: this will to self-destruction conceals a stratagem. The author is speculating on the ambiguity of Christian ethics, in which, as a matter of fact, a sacrifice is at times a means and at others an end.

The Church is first a spiritual community that wants to continue in its being. It cares little about states of soul, except insofar as they may endanger its existence. It has therefore instituted an *objective* ethic which defines the morality of its faithful by conformity to social laws, that is, to the Divine Word as contained in the sacred books and interpreted by authorized officials. It asks the faithful to help maintain the social bond by means of *faith,* that is, by unconditional adherence to the myths and by strict observance of the

rites, to intensify the solidarity of the members of the religious body by the practice of *charity* or mutual assistance, to widen the influence of the community by their works and example, to identify, through *hope,* their individual ends with the collective ends and to expect their fulfillment not so much from their personal activity as from the transcendent triumph of the social body. As, owing to their collective character, these prescriptions quite naturally endanger our personal interests and our self-love, we are frequently led to sacrifice those interests and that love. But sacrifice is only a means; it has no value in itself. It may cause us great suffering, but that is our own affair. In fact, from this point of view it appears suspect if it is too painful. The soldier who enjoys the confidence of his leaders is not the one who has the greatest difficulty in overcoming his cowardice, but rather the one who displays a natural contempt for death. In order to show how praiseworthy he is, mention is sometimes made of the external difficulties he encountered and overcame: "They were outnumbered five to one, without food, cut off from the rear," etc. But nothing is said about the difficulties he encounters within himself. It is when the war is over that the soldier speaks of his fear to astonished women. And does anyone think that a dictatorial political party, which is also a church, will be grateful to the militant who had *the greatest difficulty* in giving up his "deviation" and going back to the "party line"? On the contrary, it will keep its eye on him and at the first purge will get rid of him. In militant communities, sacrifice has value only precisely insofar as it enables the group to preserve the integrity of the social body. This is the only way of guarding against human weakness. But it *would be better* not to have to make sacrifices, it would be better to abandon, without tears, family, wife and friends at the first call. We would sacrifice our intellectual pride *because* free examination may endanger the inner cohesion of the Church. But it would have been far better if our intelligence had stopped by itself at the threshold of the mystery, for we are now suspect despite the sacrifice, or rather because of it. We have already chafed at the bit. Who knows whether tomorrow we may not give ourselves free rein. We shall sacrifice our carnal desires *because* we may scandalize, that is, may disunite when we ought to be trying to create harmony by exemplary behavior. But let us not start boasting. There is something disturbing in a description of carnal temptations. Are you going to describe the charms of the Queen of Sheba whom you have spurned? You would cause others to hate your final victory and to dream of exquisite defeats. Precisely be-

cause a too-painful sacrifice seems disquieting, because our sobs lead others to think that the sacrificed object is of great value and may arouse guilty curiosity in them, objective morality requires that we *minimize* the value of the possessions that have been abandoned. This sacred utilitarianism stresses the fact that the individual interests of the faithful are nothing compared to those of the great body to which they have the good fortune to belong. As members of the religious community, they will find much more than what they lose as individuals. In exchanging their contingent, obscure and subjective individuality for a sacred, objective personality they have everything to gain. This point of view is, in a way, that of the Saint: mortification of the flesh and flagellation are not ends in themselves; they have value only because they weaken and chastise earthly instinct, selfish aspirations; the Saint renounces only nothingness and does so in order to raise himself to being.

But in this same Christianity, a more primitive ethic, and a more strictly religious one as well, emphasizes the intrinsic value of sacrifice, which it presents as a kind of mystical potlatch. In a society of consumers, that is, one which is governed by an aristocracy that sets itself up as the supreme end of human labor, the gods are the great consumers. The ruling class is entitled to the finest products; the finest of the finest are reserved for God, the King of Kings. The reasons for the sacrifice are inverted: if one renounces the goods of this world, it is no longer because they are false goods; rather, one offers them to God because they are true goods. The lord who has been touched by grace sells his beautiful palace. But not because he has contempt for the beauty of its architecture. He will use the money from the sale to build an even more beautiful church. Besides, most of the time God is not able to come and consume in person. The consumption is represented by a real destruction; for God, things are broken, burned, buried. The potlatches are an objective rite as long as the faithful are able to believe that God inhales with pleasure the smoke of the incense or that he loves to see the flow of victims' blood. Later, when divine omnipotence comes to be better understood, the values which God accords the object that is sacrificed to him will be measured by the importance it retains in the eyes of the sacrificer, hence in the resistance that the latter feels when he wants to dispossess himself of it. Stress is laid on subjectivity: to give to God—sorrowfully, rebelliously, despairingly—that which is most legitimately dear to us is an act of piety in the highest sense of the word. Abraham will kill his son. Ultimately—and since it seems that nothing is dearer

to us than ourself—it is ourself that we shall give, by a kind of internalizing of the human sacrifice in which the sacrificer and the victim are one and the same. One lines the for-itself with a glorious in-itself; the reverse side of my grief is joy in heaven: to destroy the object is to create its celestial double.

These two ethics are not compatible. We are often mistaken about them since they both prescribe renunciation. But how can the Good of which we divest ourselves be *both* nothingness and the best? At the extreme limit of the objective ethic we abandon our possessions with indifference; this indifference is the mark of our love of God. At the extreme limit of the subjective ethic we dispossess ourselves in despair; despair is the measure of our love. One must therefore be *both* indifferent and despairing. I am not presenting these contradictions in order to condemn Christian ethics: I am far too convinced that *any* ethic is both impossible and necessary. I am describing. Although simultaneous practice of the two ethics is indeed impossible, it is at the same time indispensable, and if the Christian applies one without the other, he exposes himself to strange proceedings: if he remains purely objective, he will fall into the Catharist heresy by condemning all of creation, that is the divine work; if he is obstinately set on pure subjectivity, he will fall into Catharism backward, into the "leftish" religion of the author of the *Treatise on Abjection.*

In his view, the essential thing is the subjective movement of sacrifice. And in order to offer God the most magnificent gift, he presents him with his share of paradise and his right to do Good. In addition, as sacrifice is an act of formal destruction, it is he himself, a creature of God, that he destroys formally.* And since the greatest Evil is that which costs him most, it is the most heinous offense that will pass for the supreme sacrifice. Everything holds together if one recognizes that the greatest pain is the sign of the greatest gift, that is, if one eliminates the objective component of Christian ethics and makes of the self-inflicted torment the subjective criterion and the end of morality. One thus arrives at a religious "dolorism." Obviously a point remains to be discussed: even if one adopted this dolorism, is it true that there is more suffering and hence more merit in yielding to one's vice than in resisting it? I quite recognize the terror and disgust of the Christian who succumbs to the flesh, but I recognize equally the carnal and even emotional satisfactions, which are not to be disdained. Inversely,

* In the sense meant by Cocteau in a letter to Max Jacob which I quote from memory: "I love God to the point of being damned for love of Him."

I can readily conceive the pleasure one derives from a good conscience, but I am similarly aware of the bitter taste and painfulness of renunciation. I would not dare to decide, and if Jouhandeau decides, he does so by means of a further trick, by jumping artfully from the subjective to the objective: the superiority of vice lies in its causing an objective lessening of our being. We are worth less, even if we are not aware of it. Thus, even if carnal intercourse fills him with pleasure, the voluntary outcast *supposedly* experiences the worst suffering since his soul shrivels up. As for pleasure, he takes for granted that *objectively* it is only a dream. Consider his misfortune: the pain is not felt but it is there, haunting him, it is the objective truth of his situation; the pleasure, on the other hand, is felt, but it is a false pleasure and its function is merely to abase.

I say it outright: this dialectic stinks to high heaven. In the first place, it amounts to making a great to-do about a few acts of solitary or mutual masturbation. It amounts to no more than that. Where's the crime? Where's the enormity? Human relations are possible between homosexuals just as between a man and a woman. Homosexuals can love, give, elevate others and elevate themselves. It's surely better to get into bed with a boy friend than to go traveling in Nazi Germany when France has been defeated and strangled. And besides, I have been observing the severe discipline of the Cartesian *cogito* for too long to fall into these childish traps. A suffering which is not felt is inexistent. And a pleasure which one experiences is the very opposite of a dream. In what appeared to us just before as true humility I now discern the shrill frenzy of pride. It takes a lot of conceit to imagine that one has committed a damning sin. I would even say that Jouhandeau is playing a double game. For he has, in the first place, the pride of having become a sinner: he derives, in Evil, from himself alone; at one point he speaks of the glory of Hell. But at the same time he counts on destitution and voluntary abjection to save him: "Only passion or vice casts you into the same destitution as Saintliness, and I am of the opinion that it is only at the moment when man is so forsaken by everything and by himself that he is closest to grace: I mean to being worthy of it." We thought he was going to ruin himself, and that was what he claimed to want. But when he is at the lowest point he starts explaining that the highest and lowest merge: the essential thing is to escape from the common herd by the greatness of one's virtue or offenses: "There is a parallelism between the roads to Perfection and those to Perversion. The stages of these roads are the same, but in opposite directions. They sometimes lead to the same light through two kinds of contrary destitutions." "Going from defeat

to defeat, having completed all the stages, one ceases to want to understand, and it is in the heart of that Darkness that the Light reaches me. . . ." We discover that he was faking his humility in the depths of abjection. No doubt he wanted to *merit* the scorn that the Saint scorned, but it was only so that this will to sacrifice would confer upon him the highest merit. The Saint was close to God *despite* the scorn of others, our author *because* of this scorn. By dint of wanting to justify the horror he inspires, he ends, like the Saint, by placing himself above it. Destitution, remorse, grandeur, acute consciousness of his abjection and of the Supernatural: what is lacking for him to be elected? "He must not be saddened because of me who am only weariness and wretchedness on this side of the World, Triumph and Splendor on the side of the Eternal, but who can know this?" The Saint wants to annihilate his contingency, the Sinner wants to become his own nothingness, but that amounts to the same thing. When lived to the limit, contingency rejects itself, reveals itself as the *mere nothing* it was in the eyes of the Saint: "[When one is no longer anything] but . . . something eminently close to 'nothing' [one has] borne witness in the twinkling of an eye to the dizziness which is the other aspect of ourself: negation, absolute nothingness. . . ." But this nothingness which has been reduced to nothingness is self-annihilating; it is a transparency through which we perceive Being itself, that is, God: "God: the closest of the close, the most urgent, the only necessary fellow being . . . more essential to Myself than myself, since Myself can be only God and myself, since I cannot be completely Myself without God, but only nothingness."

And here is the final twist: "God alone knows the nature of man, which man himself is unaware of, and often perhaps when man shocks himself, God is edified." In *letter* this is conformable to dogma: it is true that God knows man better than man himself does. Yet the *spirit* has been altered. What does the Church actually mean? Two things: in the first place, that God can discern Evil, the offense, the guilty desire when man imagines he is practicing virtue; in addition, that God alone can judge and that such-and-such a man who shocks *us,* for example, Abraham, is perhaps a just man in the eyes of Him who knows his motives. Thus, He knows my evil will or the other person's good will better than I do.* But, in any case, He cannot know *my* good will better. This is

* This, be it added, is not so clear: how does God, who is all positivity, have knowledge of the negative? We have see Jouhandeau play on this ambiguity and slip into the darkness of Nonbeing in order to escape the divine gaze.

not a matter of limiting the might of the Almighty, but of defining the Christian conditions of virtue: in point of fact, for the Christian the good act is defined by the conscious intention of doing good. Since evil is darkness and nothingness, an evil intention may be hidden from me, but since Good is Being, light, self-mastery, mastery of my evil instincts, awareness—carried as far as my finiteness permits—of the consequences of my act, how could I do good unconsciously? To be sure, my acts, both good and bad, concur in maintaining the universal order. I cannot destroy the world that God has created, and, even if I am a criminal, I serve ends of which I am unaware: the ways of God are impenetrable. In a certain sense, therefore, even if the intention of my action is evil, the action is good since Christian theodicy makes Evil a condition of a greater Good. However, if God discerns in this action meanings of which I am unaware, if he foresees and approves their remote effects, he does not hold me accountable for these effects and meanings. I am responsible only for the consequences which I can know, but for these I am fully responsible; and this responsibility, which does not exceed my finiteness, is one and the same as my consciousness of it. Thus, my intention of serving God and Good exists only insofar as I am aware of it; however weak it may be, it cannot escape me. And, inversely, even if an evil action, deliberately committed, has the happiest consequences, God will take into account only my intention of doing harm. He thus knows the guilty background of my virtuous designs better than I do, but He cannot find in guilty designs a virtue of which I am unaware, for there is none.*

But our author fakes everything: he claims to be placing himself in front of his acts as in front of those of his fellow beings and to be *discovering* their meaning, which actually he *gives* them. He claims that his will to Evil is only probable, or rather, although his will knows itself in its spontaneity, that it is the effect of a deeper will to Good which is knowable only to God. At the same time, he deliberately confuses the objective conformity of the act (whatever it may be) to the designs of Providence with its subjective value, which only the intention defines. Once again he jumps from the subject to the object, from consciousness to being; and because the Sinner, despite himself, plays his part—even in his sin—in the concert of the world, he attributes to himself the full merit of cooper-

* No doubt we can judge our acts *too* severely, we can exaggerate their shadowy aspect, we can underrate ourselves. But this hypothetical reconstruction of our person takes place on another plane and from other points of view than the simple production of a good intention.

ating in this symphony, as if the sin had somewhere been expressly willed for that purpose. And as a matter of fact, if one has faith, it *was* willed somewhere and by someone: by God, who decides upon the means of maintaining the universal order. And as the Sinner is annihilated, all that remains is God himself, and everything vanishes into Good. Let us get away from this soul: it sounds phony.

But before taking leave of it, we should, nevertheless, note that it assumes greater risks than the smug soul of St. Theresa.

The tragedy of the bourgeois homosexual is that of nonconformism. How is he to preserve his guilty originality in a society into which he tends to be integrated, in other respects, by family, profession, fortune, culture and religion? Each invert solves this problem in his own way. Proust, an agnostic, bases his irresponsibility on a psychological determinism which he invents and perfects for the needs of the cause. The Proustian analyses are pleas in self-defense, even—and particularly—when they deal with behavior and feelings unrelated to his "vice." He adopts the attitude, with greater sublety, of the Greek thief whose answers to the questions of the Tzedek Test are reported in Appendix II. "There are no honest people," said the latter. And Proust: "There are no normal people. Charlus' homosexuality is a cancer that eats away at him, but the jealousy of Swann, a heterosexual, is just as destructive." Gide, a Protestant, a man trained to engage in free inquiry, accustomed from childhood to feel responsible, without intermediary, to an abstract God who is closer to a legislator than to a metaphysical and creative power, strives to wipe out social prohibitions on behalf of the impulses of his spontaneity. He shuts out the sacred, substitutes for the Supernatural a Nature which tolerates all sexual behavior with the same indifference. He transforms the concept of *inflicted* nonconformity into an ethico-aesthetic value: willed *irreplaceability*. Over the years, in the course of an uninterrupted dialogue with the Catholics, his idea of God changes into a foggy notion, half sacred, half secular, which unites the advantages of atheism with those of faith. Jouhandeau, a Catholic, is crushed by the Church. One does not "do away with" Catholicism. Although one sometime breaks with it, one is left half dead and marked forever. Jouhandeau temporizes, he tries to arrange a tolerable life for himself within the denominational community. If he resembles Genet so strongly, it is because he plays a losing game: Proust's homosexual imperialism does not hesitate to attack human nature; that of Gide attacks the reformed religion. Jouhandeau accepts the Church's dogmas, prohibitions, metaphysics, in fact everything,

including the traditional psychology of confessors. In this frame of reference he is assured of damnation. There remains for him only to try his hand at "loser wins." But in order to win, one must first lose. The *only* salvation at which he can aim is something beyond hell. But this something will be revealed only if he first conscientiously gets himself damned. We find in Jouhandeau the Gidian idea of irreplaceability; he too starts from an inflicted nonconformity which has to be cultivated, deepened and transformed into a work of art: "Every man is born evil and is entitled to his original evilness, to the flaw in his makeup, and I am speaking not only of the very particular flaw which affects the species in general, but of the even more particular flaw with which each individual is marked at birth." In Gide, however, the idea of the inherent flaw disappears with that of the sacred: the systematic cultivation of individual difference ends in breaking up the moral law of Protestantism into an infinity of particular "categorical imperatives." And this individualism opens out on a social optimism: in acquiring deeper knowledge of the individual, one will find the universal, one will end perhaps in founding a new society. This is accounted for by the fact that the Protestant's integration into the religious community is not strong enough to restrain him. In Jouhandeau, on the other hand, the cult of particularity, though revealing itself as the *only* way out, remains a deadly sin because he has not even attempted to liquidate the values of the denominational community* and because it is a matter of keeping everything. And where

* The suicide rate is higher among Protestants than among Catholics. Durkheim concluded from this that the Protestant is less strongly integrated into his community than the Catholic into his. Halbwachs, for reasons which it would take too long to go into and not all of which seem to me convincing, has modified this conclusion: "Religious conceptions are not the central factor about which urban societies are organized and peasant groups consolidate and perpetuate themselves. The principle of their cohesion lies not in this but in a social structure made up of customs and institutions, some traditional and others more recent. These include religious practices. But there is no reason to view complex groups from the religious standpoint alone. Thus, it is not the religious cohesion of Catholic groups which explains the fact that their suicide rate is lower than that of less conservative societies, but rather the traditional cohesion of groups which, though composed mainly of Catholics, are united by many other common features." (*Les Causes du Suicide,* Alcan, p. 29.) However, even if we grant this modification, the differences of social integration in the cases of Proust, Gide and Jouhandeau are glaringly evident. The first, a rich Jewish intellectual, was a city man accustomed to scientific analysis (his father and brother were doctors); his environment was that of "fashionable" society, that is, of the sophisticated upper bourgeoisie and of the declining aristocracy which readily closed its eyes to vices, provided they were not flaunted. The enemy did not dwell in its consciousness. The second belonged to the well-to-do Protestant bourgeoisie; he thought that he summed up the characteristic features of several provinces; he lived successively in social groups of different structures, in Paris, Uzès and Cuverville and, consequently, he escaped from each of them. The habits of lucidity and critical analysis which he acquired from an austere but universalist education could be turned against the religion that

Gide succeeds in developing a secular ethic of liberation through a slow and patient sharpening of sacred concepts which end by being convenient and harmless headings, Jouhandeau is forced to invent a religious asceticism of damnation. The soul is entitled to its individuality, but this individuality, which is its specific evil, leads it straight to Hell. Both men seek a final justification because both of them have tasted of the forbidden fruit. But Gide concludes: nothing that comes spontaneously from the deepest part of oneself can be evil; it is oriented toward Good. And Jouhandeau: one must go to the very limit of crime in order to find God. But, as we saw above, the ethic of Evil is pitiless: a sin that has been committed with the certainty that it brings one closer to God, with the will to draw closer to Him, is no longer a sin and consequently does not bring one closer to the Almighty. If, as a result of the destructive suffering it causes in the sinner's soul, Evil can become a merit, it must not be committed casually; the horror, the self-loathing, the despair, must be true. One must keep going lower and lower without hope; one must will one's damnation and believe that one has been damned forever. In a certain sense, Jouhandeau takes all the risks, his abandonment is absolute; there will not be a word of dogma, not a legend, not a confessor to encourage him. Sacred history does, to be sure, abound in edifying anecdotes about hardened sinners who are saved at the brink of death. And, moreover, it is forbidden to despair: hope is a theological virtue. But the purpose of the stories to which I refer is to give us an indication of God's immense kindness. The sinners in these stories have damned themselves beyond appeal, they have given God every reason for dooming them, and if the Eternal saves them at the last moment, he does so *despite* the reasons, despite simple justice, out of love. In short, one must *hope* that God forgives. But our author's infernal pride does not care about hoping, does not care about hypothetical forgiveness. No doubt he does not intend to force God to save him, but at least he wants his behavior, though remaining perfectly damnable, to provide Justice with reasons for absolving him. In fact, if he gives up his place in Paradise, it is in order that it be

hampered him. Jouhandeau is a Catholic and a provincial, and comes from a poor and pious family. As an underpaid employee, his situation in the secular society that crushes him is in the image of that occupied by the sinner in a religious society. He is on the lowest level of the bourgeoisie, and if he boasts of triumphing over those on the higher levels, he does so by virtue of his secret spirituality and at the cost of an absolute reversal of values. This provincial remains strongly attached to the small town from which he comes and is aware of the repressive power of scandal, whereas Baron de Charlus, a rich, powerful, cultivated nobleman, has everything that is needed to place himself proudly above public opinion.

restored to him at the right-hand side of the Lord. There is in this willful damnation the exigency found in all potlatch; it demands that its gift be paid for with another gift. But in that case, and if he wants to enter paradise with his head high, he has to hide this exigency from himself. Just as the pious man must do Good without hope of reward if he wants to be rewarded in the end, so Jouhandeau must do Evil for Evil's sake and without hope of salvation. He will find light only in the heart of darkness, he will know hope only beyond despair. He has, as we have seen, cleverly supposed that God discerns his good intentions better than he himself does. But he has to be unaware of them for that very reason. Although God may "often be edified when man is shocked," it is nevertheless necessary that man, here below, remain shocked. If he refuses to place his "hope of something beyond despair" in divine indulgence, he must then base it on ignorance. He has only a single weak reason for hoping, to wit, that he *does not know* how he appears in the eyes of the Creator. What he does *know* is that he is condemned by the Church and by Society. But he also knows that he does not know everything. The final light is the darkest Night, the great night of Unknowing. Beyond the blinding evidence of his damnation, this soul knows *nothing* more, and it is on this *nothing* that it founds its hope. It is *perhaps* elected, but if so, the human world is merely a farce, including revealed dogma and the entire Church. Perhaps. Perhaps it is necessary to go that far.*

He *thinks* that he is elected. He substantifies his ignorance and the "nothing" that protects him against *all.* He *thinks,* and this probabilism suddenly reveals, in a flash, his frightful resentment against those who scorn him. *Yes,* if he is saved, it is because there will be surprises on the Day of Judgment: they'll all be damned, all of them, the bourgeois, the priests, the cops, all except a few homosexuals—and perhaps the saints. The farce ends with this tremendous damnation.

Resentment, pride, Black Mass, dangerous games of evil and good, *merit* of the evildoer: at the point to which these descriptions have led us, we have only to take one step further to join Genet. After the canonized Saint, after the Sinner, what a relief to be with him again.

What rectitude he has, what frankness! The reckless daring with which he runs his risks! The acrobatics we have just described were all performed above a net. The net has now been removed:

* Cocteau goes that far in *Bacchus:* "If God's designs are impenetrable, it is possible that he punishes what you call good and rewards what you call evil" (Act II, Scene 4).

the acrobat is risking his life. We are, of course, going to meet again with the old battered concepts of destitution, humility, all the terms of hagiographic literature. Yet everything is new: the reason is that God has disappeared; God was the net.

To begin with, Genet breaks all the records in the big crime race. St. Theresa let herself be condemned for crimes she had not committed. The author of the *Treatise on Abjection* committed the crimes that are imputed to him, but he makes a devil of a fuss about a few venial, sensual pleasures. In the gallery of portraits of homosexuals, we find a great marshal, a member of Pétain's cabinet, very highly regarded by the clergy before the defeat of Germany, some very Catholic kings, popes, a famous agent of the Intelligence Service. Does anyone believe that these eminent personages are in hell? And if all the heterosexual Communists in the Eastern democracies were changed into anti-Soviet homosexuals, the Church would certainly proclaim it a miracle. The greatest Evil, for Genet, is to betray. That is sufficient: it is *true* that betrayal is inexpiable, it is *true* that it is the only offense for which history has no pity. Ivan the Terrible has been rehabilitated; before long Hitler may be rehabilitated; but the Duke of Bourbon, commander-in-chief of the French armies, is condemned without appeal. Genet has had the courage to choose the worst.

The offenses which are most cruelly punished are committed against men. To offend God, if he exists, is dreadful. But, after all, God loves us: if we repent when necessary, he will forgive us. "No sin but should find mercy." Men are not merciful; they never forgive grave offenses, they kill. Besides, even if there were a posthumous appeal for mercy, what would it matter to Genet since he does not believe that he is immortal? And, in addition, his semiatheism disarms him. He cannot, like Jouhandeau, divert himself by playing a double game: there is only one game. He cannot take advantage of the age-old conflict between God and men, he cannot go from the latter to the former the way a child utilizes marital discord to set his parents against each other in order to get from one what the other refuses him. There are only men. All the pious frauds of whom we have spoken thought they had their absolute excuse in God. The more Jouhandeau destroys himself here below, the more he re-creates himself in Heaven. Genet's *only truth* comes to him from men. Thereby the absolute drops back to earth. No angel will wipe away the spit with which he is covered, no eternity of glory will challenge his present wretchedness. This world has no underside; in this world, sufferings are inexpiable, ineffaceable. The pet-

tiest of the disgusting experiences that he has put up with is an infinity that crushes him, since he knows that nothing will compensate for it. Jouhandeau, who is highly integrated into religious society, works himself into a good position and manages to live in it. I do not doubt that his anguish is unbearable, but the fact is that it all takes place in his head. Before 1942 I never met anyone who did not esteem him; he was a respectable person, just like the surrealists. Genet, who is excluded from secular society, suffers in his flesh. If he really commits acts of betrayal, he will be beaten up or stabbed. The destitution is therefore real: he deprives himself of *all* love. The humility is entire: men scorn him and he knows no judge to whom he can appeal.

No doubt about it, he is at the bottom of the ladder. From every point of view: deprived of love, thanks to himself, and burning with a desire to love, scorned by all, accepting their scorn, knowing that he deserves it and striving to deserve it even more, charged with the most serious offenses against others and against himself, simplified to the extreme and dragging his past complexity like a ball and chain; he has chosen finiteness, helplessness and hatred. For Faust to fool Satan, for Jouhandeau to betray Evil, is only to dissipate the darkness: God approves one's not keeping one's word when it has been given to the Demon. But for Genet to betray Evil is to corrode it by a worse evil: it is to achieve for himself discomfort in crime. In the case of Faust and Jouhandeau, the final betrayal is the trick that produces light; in that of Genet, it is the thickening of the darkness, it is the spinning of the compass needle. He literally "loses his bearings." Thinking in accordance with two systems and two languages, producing and destroying at the same time, hated by those who ought to love him, loved by those who are going to hate him, an abominable accomplice of Good which he rejects, a sworn enemy of Evil which he has adopted as an end, he attains such a degree of confusion that two simultaneous and opposed Evils cancel and strengthen each other at the same time. Urging his companions to steal, then denouncing them to the police who go after them and put them to flight, he prevents the theft from taking place. The final result is zero, but within himself this zero corresponds to the infinity of Evil. He has gone *mad*. And yet this madness is reason since it is the logical result of the lucid, rigorous, intense, austere quest of the greatest Evil. At the bottom of the ladder, he performs a feat: his reason, without ceasing to reason, becomes mad reasoning. We quoted earlier three strangely similar texts: one by the Saint, one by the Sinner and one by the

Thief. But a more searching study has shown us a kind of faking on the part of the first two. In the case of the third, the cloud is torn apart by a phrase, a princely phrase: "I became abject." Not that I like abjection. But there is something about the phrase that smacks of the swordsman: the decision is brusque and imperious, without whys and wherefores and without appeal. Jouhandeau does, of course, call his book *Treatise on Abjection,* but he is a man of law, a pettifogger. Abjection is always presented slantwise in his line of argument, in three-quarter face. Or else it is a toboggan, you shoot forward in one of his sentences, you slide down Evil, you finish in Good. His style—one of the finest of our time, with astonishing resources—displays at times a suspicious oiliness, a flabbiness, a glassy transparency, a hideous amiability. He writes: "It suffices that each man's Demon not have the last word." And, in fact, he so manages that a word, a supernumerary word, which represents Good, creeps into each of his sentences; sometimes it is simply the tense of the verb. He would not write "I became abject," but "I had become abject." Genet, a petty cavalier of crime, at times inserts, between two sentences, a short, hard word that stamps his will to the irremediable.

And yet, he no more escapes the fundamental question than do the others: why want to *be* a Saint? Earlier it was a question only of doing, in fact, of undoing, and now one has to act *in order to be.* Once again praxis is subordinated to ontology. Why? Genet wanted to resorb Being into consciousness and wanted consciousness to be dissipated while dissolving its object. We made a great effort to enter into his views despite our distaste, but now it appears that this will to nothingness concealed a recourse to Being, hence to optimism, hence to Good. Thus, ancient skepticism is secretly based on dogmatic reason: it poses the truth of skepticism. This time we refuse to go along with him. On the grounds of the effort we have made to understand him, we are unwilling to follow him in this strange whirligig wherein he seeks annihilation in order to attain fullness of being, wherein he will commit the most heinous act in order to achieve the greatest Good. As Camus would say, Genet has taken the plunge. Why did he not remain a pure existence, a pure evil will? This evil will declared that it was sovereign. Is sovereignty therefore no longer enough for it?

Yet this new reversal was almost necessary. It is explained by both the *structure* of criminal action and by Genet's *inner bent.*

First, by criminal action. As soon as Evil is achieved, it changes; Being deals with it in its own way and engulfs it. The evildoer betrays Evil, as we have seen. But that is not all: Evil also betrays

the evildoer. Crime is the criminal's snare: he wanted to transform as much Being as possible into Nothingness. But as his act is an *achievement,* Nothingness is at the same time metamorphosed into Being and the sovereignty of the evildoer turns into slavery. The quest of Saintliness is, firstly, a defense of Genet against the betrayals of Evil.

As long as the experience of Evil remains at the stage of solitary rumination, it is a princely *cogito* which reveals to consciousness its particularity with respect to Being. I want to be a monster, a hurricane; everything human is alien to me, I transgress all man-made laws, I trample upon all values, nothing which *is* can define or limit me. Nevertheless, I exist, I will be the icy blast that will destroy all life. Therefore, I am *above essence:* I do whatever I like, I become whatever I like and I escape what I have just become because I decide to will the contrary of what I willed. I have no law other than my whim because whim, which is contradictory and fleeting, baffles all definition. I contemplate ironically, outside of myself and even within myself, where education has deposited them, the imperatives of the collectivity. They are there, but they no longer have any effect. I have shelved the world, Being is lit up by the dim light of nonbeing and the universal by that of the exception. The most clear-minded, most carefully premeditated decision to do evil remains a dream, it is a flickering of creation. How could I fail to want to eternalize by an act the wonderful instant in which Nothingness holds being suspended in brightness? The crime is a miracle; it will place legality in abeyance. One can kill only in lordly fashion. "And what if everyone did the same?" But the point is that *I* am not everyone. "And what proof have you?" Nothing other than the act itself. Wonderful, dizzying freedom of the Evildoer: Terror.

I commit the crime. All at once this whole phantasmagoria bursts like a bubble: I am again a being in the midst of other beings. In killing I have *given myself a nature. Before,* I dreamt of proving by my crime that I escaped all essence; *afterward,* my essence is my crime, it strangles me in its iron grip. It was meant to reveal to the universe the power of the exception, of particularity; and now it is incorporated into being and becomes an object among other objects; it enters statistics. What was it? An act of incest, a rape, an infanticide? There is a certain number of rapes, infanticides and acts of incest per year. The number will be no higher this year than last. Am I a monster? Probably: but monsters are categorized, compared. Sociologists, criminologists and psychiatrists are going to

dissect this supposed miracle and reveal the rigorous laws that govern it. But, it may be argued, the same holds for all human actions. But the fact is, it doesn't: a technical invention, a work of art, have a positive content which remains irreducible. After you have explained Racine by his environment, by the age, by his childhood, there remains *Phèdre,* which is inexplicable. But as the evil action wills itself as pure destruction, when you have reduced its perpetrator to being only a *case,* only an illustration of contemporary society, there remains no residue; the crime is the criminal's failure. The culprit considers his act, that highly individual act which changes into a universal before his eyes, and he no longer recognizes it. The stupidest murderers will be content with muttering until the day of their execution: "I don't understand what I did." Others will yield, like the Marquis de Sade, to the ignoble intention of minimizing their offense: "All that fuss," he wrote from the Bastille, "because I whipped a whore."

Those who do not deign to repudiate themselves and who remain haunted by the obscure and glorious dream from which they have just awakened have only one expedient: they must *save their crime.* Not the great atrocity which they thought they had committed and which disdainfully rejected all justification, but the low, petty offense which they actually committed. And what does that mean? It means that since the evildoer, as a result of his crime, has fallen, has sunk into being, he will be able to save his crime by integrating it into being. Less well-tempered minds will dissolve Being into Good without intermediary; it was *right* to kill: the victim was a Jew, a Negro, a Communist. But if the criminal is tough-minded, he will want to remain an evildoer to the very end. This means that he will build a world system for the express purpose of justifying violence. But the latter will thereupon lose its sovereignty: it was a miracle against the grain, the lofty assertion of a right to exception, an extraordinary attempt to keep the universal suspended in the particular and being in nonbeing; it didn't give a damn about theories; it could will itself, live itself, *exist itself,* but not think itself, not deduce itself from principles. It was the unique and the ineffable. When the criminal has built, on the basis of being, an ethic of Evil which in *certain* cases legitimates *certain* acts of destruction, his crime will become a pure and simple application of the ethical law. Pure numerical individuality will substitute for his particularity. Whereupon Evil, in becoming the generating principle of *all* crimes, goes over to being. Though remaining nominally Evil, it subtly grounds itself, in secret, on an

ineffable, invisible and dreadful good. The ethic of Evil is artfully completed by a religious mystery.

Such is the case of Genet. He steals in glory. Then, beaten and mocked, he is merely a petty scoundrel, the weakest of all burglars, the hoodlum, the pansy. The detectives search him and find in his pocket the tube of vaseline which he used in intercourse. They burst out laughing. Once again, the original crisis, the crisis which is forever repeated, overwhelms and metamorphoses him. The two moments of transformation correspond to two moments of self-defense: the "poetic" thief viewed himself as a *prince of evil;* the ridiculous tramp becomes the *female saint.* When he decides to steal, to betray, he does Evil for Evil's sake, without a reason, haughtily, by the simple, divine decree of His Will. When he serves his sentence, he *has done* Evil *in order* to attain abjection and the most utter destitution, in order to suffer. Before and during the crime, Genet wills suffering because it is the index of Evil; after it, he decides that he willed Evil for the suffering which he experiences in prison. In short, there is a time for wickedness: that of praxis, and a time for Saintliness: that of reflection on praxis, of retrospective interpretation of his activity. *Before:* "I, Genet, am doing Evil because such is my own sweet will. No ethic or philosophy can be derived from theft." *Afterward:* "Brethren, one must suffer." The retrospective illusion transforms the demoniacal project into a religion of suffering. Of course, once the principle of Saintliness has been established, the latter will remain as a permanent system of interpretation, and Genet will later refer to it *at the same time* as he refers to the explanation by the will to Evil. One can see the wiliness of this reversal: Genet claims to be saving Evil; in seeking suffering he does not cease, he says, to will the worst. Isn't suffering an Evil? Does it not horrify? And what about abjection? And self-hatred? May it not be that this bouquet of torments is the Supreme Evil? In willing Evil first, Genet wills, by the same token, the simplification and diminution of his moral person, and also destitution, failure, torments, the triumph of his enemies, the final punishment. All of this, as we have seen, is rigorously deduced from the concept of evil will. But if he should suddenly take it into his head to will this destitution, these torments, this failure, *for their own sake,* if he should take pleasure in doing so, we have an ethic of abjection, an ascesis which paves the way for itself to Saintliness. The motive of this sophism is that it preserves for suffering the *negative* value which it had in the system of Evil (when it was deduced from evil will), while integrating it into a positive ethic

whose supreme end is purification. Since he is seeking suffering *for its own sake,* it thus becomes *a* good. But while asserting that it is his major end, he continues to maintain that it derives from Evil and that it is an Evil in itself and for itself. Whereupon Saintliness, the ideal of the one who is seeking suffering for the Evil that it does and, simultaneously, Evil for the suffering that it causes, is both good and bad, an appearance of Good which melts into Evil, an appearance of Evil which melts into Good. Genet therefore thinks that he has saved his offense in its very contingency while preserving the absolute right of Evil. If some invisible observer made the following comment: "So you see, you flaunter of vice, you wanted to blow up the world and what have you done? You committed a trivial little theft which was clumsily executed and which you didn't even carry off since you've landed in the jug," he would proudly reply: "You miss the point. I wanted the theft to be a botch. I willed its failure. I, Prince of Evil, wanted to be arrested as the clumsiest of hoodlums. In like manner, Christ chose to be incarnated in the most wretched of men. This ridiculous mess is my Passion." Let us imagine that the observer insists, that he asks Genet: "So it's for the beauty of sacrifice, for the love of Saintliness, that you made yourself abject? So you're pursuing Good in your own way, like everyone else?" Genet will answer: "Not at all. For the evildoer's failure is the necessary consequence of the will to do evil. The evildoer wants the action to be *conceived* as a terrifying sacrilege and *at the same time* wants it to be reduced, in the execution, to a mediocre, common-law offense. Insofar as he conceives it haughtily, he is a prince of Evil; insofar as he accepts it with suffering and humility, he is a Saint. But whichever his attitude, he remains the same evildoer."

Furthermore, the ambiguity of this asceticism, which is both good and evil, is itself an Evil, for it misleads. Later, when we examine Genet's work, we shall see him taking pleasure in constructing aberrant notions, the aim of which is to shake the tranquil assurance of honest folk. The name he has given to his present attitude is willfully blasphemous. He offers us a caricature of Saintliness, a diabolical and deceptive image which looks like the Saint but which burns with hell-fire whoever touches it. Thus, he takes every precaution: if he is driven into a corner, he will readily admit that he has been diverting himself at our expense, that he was only trying to shock us even more. If he has taken it into his head to give the name Saintliness to this demoniacal and spurious perversion of a sacred notion, it is because he felt like committing a sacri-

lege. Everything is set to rights again: Evil has been saved by being integrated into an ethic of Good; and when one tries to draw closer to this ethic, one realizes that it was only a mirage: it vanishes. But Genet is lying to us again: he wants to hide his defeat; he maintains that he is still a faithful partisan of Evil, but he has already sided with Good. He longs for Saintliness, he wants to acquire it. What is it that he wants? To be. To be a saint, to be an evildoer, it doesn't matter: to be his being. His fierce will to make contact with himself has not been dissipated. No doubt it was not involved at first. We have been examining in this chapter only his will to do, that is, the impulse to defy that made him, in each particular case, do what was expected of him; in short, the worst. But his passion for being influences from afar his practical will, just as a storm at sea influences the local sky. He acts, to be sure; he poses Evil as his supreme end; but at the same time he steals a glance at a fundamental and unformulated goal, which is to become what he is. Finally his acts change into gestures, his most heinous crimes are only incantatory dances which will make his sacred personality descend into him.

But the situation into which he has been put is such that he can affirm himself only by denying himself: his being is that of the evildoer, and the evildoer is relentless in destroying being. In order to touch his reflection, Narcissus plunges into abjection, into failure, into impotence, and when he makes contact with himself, he encounters only an abstraction, the empty shape of nothingness. This will to find himself, so clear in its principle, clouds over as soon as he starts to execute it. How is it conceivable that he must destroy himself systematically in order to endow himself with being? In a particular act, his position is tenable: self-destruction, when not carried out completely, can pass for the obverse of an act of self-creation. By informing on his friend for money, Genet loses love and gives himself greed. But if he is to carry the attempt to the limit, absolute self-destruction will have to coincide with absolute self-creation. Genet joins Jouhandeau, who finds all of being at the moment of sinking into nothingness. The latter, however, kept a card in reserve: God. Will Genet, who has done without that card, get out of the difficulty? His answer to our question is the Saintliness "trick." In order to grasp it, let us go back to the starting point.

He had chosen to contradict the general will in himself by a particular will. If he dreamt of killing a child, it was because he discovered within himself a respect for childhood which is common to all men. He now goes even further and chooses to contradict his

particular will by another particular will: he betrays the person he loves. He is thus unable to discover his being in any of these wills: neither in the general will, which is immediately contradicted by a particular will, nor in the particular will, which will retain its sacrilegious character only if the general will is maintained against it, nor in the will to love, which presupposes the will to betray, nor in the will to betray, whose function is to contradict the will to love. *Who* is Genet? Nothing other than the contradiction itself, the pure instant when the Yea is in the Nay and the Nay in the Yea. Positive and negative should cancel each other, Yea and Nay should clear the board. He would thus attain pure nothingness. In that way, Genet *would be* nullity. But it is precisely consciousness which effects the opposition of the contradictions, and this consciousness is all the more acute in that the opposition is stronger: "I felt myself protected by the fabulous power of the Reich. Nevertheless, in my heart I was aware of the intense and incandescent presence of Jean Genet, who was mad with fear. But perhaps I had never been so aware of myself as in such moments. When I kept Jean clinging by the teeth to the muzzle of my revolver, the fear also shrank my center of consciousness by making it more intense. The fear of killing combating the fear of not killing." In short, this consciousness which wants to annihilate itself, this consciousness which is torn by contradiction, becomes, by the same token, the unity of the contradiction. Genet calls this paradox—which shifts from nothingness to existence and from conflict to unity and according to which one exists all the more in that one wants all the more to annihilate oneself—"the impossible Nullity."

Thus, the moment in which Genet's immediate consciousness borders on annihilation is precisely that in which his reflective consciousness *exists* most. It *exists,* but it *is not.* It is a supreme lucidity which watches its own destruction. No matter, he has the solution: since consciousness is all the more acute in that the contradiction is the more unbearable, since he exists all the more as a self-torturer in that he is closer to dying as a victim of himself, it is this consciousness that must be transformed into being. It must be given the somber density, the massive permanence, of fever. The being which he demands for it is thus the being of things. It must be able to be without having to act its being: *in itself.* But to be thus is to be in the manner of objects, and the object presupposes a subject for which it is an object. If Genet wants to discover the secret being of his consciousness, he must find out in *whose* eyes this consciousness is secretly an object.

Since childhood he has been living in a state of anxiety. The truth about himself escapes him, and yet others know it: they see him. First, it was the decent folk: when he lied, when he stole, innumerable eyes focused on his immediate consciousness, saw through his lies, were able to recognize him for the evildoer that he was. In order to combat them, to wrest his truth from them, he tried to watch himself, he spied on himself, but reflection did not disclose to him the *being* of his consciousness; it merely lit up more clearly his transparent moods. The Other's gaze did not disappear thereby. It, too, jumped to the higher level, and this time it focused on the reflective consciousness. While this consciousness is busy deciphering the immediate consciousness, it feels that it is being spied on. But this invisible witness has changed its nature and is no longer the stupid chorus of honest folk. It is Genet himself, but *Genet as Other*. The divine gaze, a stranger within the immanence, impassive, absent, divinized, perceives what underlies the poems, the language, the events, reads what is going on inside Genet as if he were an open book and deciphers his silent truth. The child grows up, leaves the theological age of childhood and enters the abstract, metaphysical age of youth. The personal God who contemplated him withers, becomes schematized; the idol changes into a metaphysical virtue. It is now merely a glassy, impersonal, absent gaze whose sole reason for being is to recover the *truth* which is eluding Genet's consciousness.

This is the moment for assigning it a new function. Since this shadow of a gaze changes everything upon which it touches into an object, it must petrify the reflective consciousness while the latter is at grips with itself. It is to this gaze that Genet's *being* will appear, and this being is merely the obverse of existence. "I think, therefore I am. I am a thinking substance." If Descartes has substantified thought, it is because he believes that God sees him: as an object for an absolute being who knows what is true and what is false, his truth is to be an absolute object. And Genet, in like manner: "I do Evil, therefore I am. I am an evildoing substance." This imaginary gaze of the God in whom he has ceased to believe is a crystal whose perpetual touch produces a perpetual crystallization. Genet is thus petrified at the moment when his existence is most intense. This absolute subject is *elsewhere,* for a certain gaze, an absolute object. And since this reflection which goes over to being is precisely the sparkling lucidity whose maximum intensity coincides with the radical dissolution of the human, since the extreme limit of annihilation marks the supreme intensity of the reflective

consciousness, the maximum of *existence* becomes, for the gaze which *fixes* consciousness at this crucial moment, the maximum of being, but in reverse. The trick is done: destruction changes back into construction, the zero moment becomes identical with the moment of plenitude, the mystery of the impossible nullity discloses that of the ineluctable substance.

But then what is the difference, in the last analysis, between Jouhandeau and Genet? Simply this: in the former, God has remained a subject, He is a Person; in the latter, He has been transformed little by little into a simple power, He has become both the impersonal operation of objectification and the pure medium in which existence is refracted into essence. In short, He is now only the general and abstract condition for the transition to being. This God ends by being only a kind of bondsman; He becomes identified with Genet's unshakable optimism; He guarantees Genet that his wretched, suffering life has, somewhere in the absolute, a *meaning*. In short, there is henceforth a dimension of the sacred in which Genet's acts sculpt a statue for him.

But this mad hope is Genet's veritable treason. This time he is not betraying Evil for a worse Evil. He is simply going over to Good with bag and baggage. It is true that he wills himself an evildoing substance, but, however evildoing it may be, since it is a substance it is good, for its permanence and density come from being. And Being is Good.

Furthermore, Saintliness conceals a form of quietism, for he who does not believe himself to be a *substance* knows that he is only what he makes himself and that he cannot cease to make himself without ceasing to exist. As long as he is alive he must struggle, and everything must always start over again. Past successes cannot facilitate future victories. But, on the other hand, there is in Being a kind of inert perseverence: it can neither emerge from nothingness nor return to it without some external action. *To be* a Saint is therefore *to continue to be,* to take advantage of acquired momentum. Whatever the combats in which he engages on earth, Genet is relayed, in the abstract heaven where existence changes into essence, by the passivity of substance. Saintliness is eternal rest, it is that which has been attained, it is the reward. "In the midst of this suffering, it seemed to me that there remained—shame having burned me all over—in the midst of flames or rather the vapors of shame, an unattackable matter, of a shape formed by sharp, severe lines, a kind of diamond rightly called solitaire." Impossible to put it better: is not the diamond the quintessence of being? Of course

Genet has never claimed that he *was* a Saint, but only that he aspired to become one. In that case, to rest in being would be an ideal, the conclusion of a perhaps infinite progression. But to progress in Saintliness means to accumulate a little more being with each denial, with each betrayal. Genet may never finish his statue but he does not cease to shape it.

And, in addition, Being is, above all, *reconciliation.* One cannot imagine conflicts within it since it is, by definition, positivity. But Genet is photographed at the moment of the wrench, when his consciousness is torn by contradiction: loving and betraying, willing Good in order the better to do Evil, lowering himself in order to rise, annihilating himself in order to exist. For nothing in the world would this evildoer, who is relentlessly trying to live reality in all its conflicts, be willing to effect a synthesis of the contradictory elements. It is not unity that he wants, that gentle dream of Leibniz, of Aldous Huxley, of all naïve optimists, but laceration, division, despair. The following words of Jean Wahl are as applicable to him as they are to Kierkegaard, in fact more so:

"[He] wants to make things difficult, to do nothing that will blunt the terms of the problem. There is no possible meeting of these absolute oppositions. We no longer have mediations but paradox and the leap, the pathos of thought, the fever of thought. Here we are no longer in the world of homogeneity but in that of radical heterogeneities, of qualitative differences, of absolute novelties. And the absolute will no longer be that which unites, but, in conformity with the origin of the word, that which is separated and that which separates."

But the sly recourse to Being enables him, as it does Kierkegaard, to make the Leap. He rejects unification, but so manages matters as to have unity all the same. He will not synthesize opposites, but their reconciliation will take place by itself in being, or rather they will identify with each other without reconciling. Since he will *there* have all the more being in that he exists more and since the measure of his existence is the violence of his contradiction, the more he contradicts himself *for himself,* the more he *makes himself be in himself,* in a state of unalterable peace. The transition to being is not at all comparable to the Hegelian synthesis on which the thesis and the antithesis are based. It transports the conflicts to a ground of absolute positivity. There is no *solution* of the antinomies. But as there is no place for negation within being, the terms of the opposition lose their negative power. They are always contrary, but instead of repelling each other and of each being the

other's nothingness, they interpenetrate. The willful and actual unity, whereby freedom made the contraries exist by virtue of and in opposition to each other, hardens into a substance, and the opposites are "stuck" in this mold, which hardens. In the calmness of being there is identity of discord and harmony. Breton wrote in 1930: "Everything leads us to believe that there is a certain point in the mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Surrealist activity has no motive other than the hope of determining this point. It is thus obviously absurd to ascribe to this activity a solely destructive, or constructive, tendency. The point in question is a fortiori that at which construction and destruction can no longer be set against each other. . . . [It will be] the annihilation of being within a blind, inner diamond which will no more be the soul of ice than that of fire." It is precisely this "point in the mind" that Genet is seeking. But Breton hopes, if not to "see" the superreal, at least to merge with it in a unity wherein vision and being are one and the same. Genet knows that enjoyment of it is denied him on principle. He can only set up his own superreality off to the side by a destructive movement which is a construction, in reverse, of being. In reverse, love and betrayal cease to "be set against each other"; in reverse, the high and the low cease to be perceived as contradictions and the greatest Evil is at the same time the greatest Good. In reverse, "the annihilation of being within a blind, inner diamond" becomes production of a diamond, that is, of pure being. Breton's superreal, perceived as the inaccessible and substantial reverse of existence, is Genet's Saintliness.

In short, what has he done? Examining his procedure from the point of view of logic, I would say that it resembles Descartes' in every way. There is in Genet a methodical doubt carried to the point of destruction of everything, a *cogito* of Evil and, in the end, an unforeseen return of substantialism. But as it is a matter not of knowledge but of praxis, we must realize that this logical reversal conceals a more or less obscure will to re-establish an order of Being and Good. It has been reported that he refused to make the acquaintance of Gide, because, he said, "his immorality is suspect." I would go further and would say that *all* systematic immorality is suspect and covers up a last recourse to Good. For Evil cannot be system: either it is an explosion or it is nothing at all.

However, it is not true that Genet is simply seeking to substitute one ethic for another, as Gide did, and as did Nietzsche and Stirner.

He has sincerely attempted to liquidate *all* ethics, that of anarchists as well as others, because every ethic implies humanism and humanism is the bugbear of this outcast who has been relegated to the inhuman. We would do better, once again, to compare Genet to Kierkegaard. They both wish to prove through action that the order of religious values is above and beyond the humanist ethic. For Genet, man's end is not man, not even the Superman who can appear only at the conclusion of a *social* evolution; it is, rather, to destroy, within himself, time, history and the human so that the reign of the eternal and the divine may be born *in the instant.* We come back to our starting point: the sacrifice. Abraham sacrificed only his son. Genet sacrifices the world and himself in order to have access to the universe of the sacred.

Should he be reproached for having *made the leap?* I haven't the heart to do that. One would first have to decide whether Genet wills evil *in order* to be a Saint or whether he is really eager to lose and whether his recourse to Saintliness is only a consolation that he accords himself, a hope that he allows himself in order to lighten his difficulties. But how is one to know? Does Genet himself know? At times it is one and at times the other, depending on the oscillations of his inner tension. I do not doubt that he sincerely seeks despair and failure when he is at his best. Saintliness is above all a great fever-dream that haunts him when he is a prisoner and cannot act. And even then there is something suspect about it, something that is indefinably disturbing. To reduce the Evil that he does to being only a means of attaining Being would be to impoverish his moral life. For it can be said with at least equal truth that Being is for him only a means of attaining the greatest Evil. I grant that Saintliness is the supreme goal of his efforts. But it is also an infernal caricature, the worst blasphemy. Moreover, I would like to know where one would find a more lucid spirit than his, for this outcast is the only one to have discovered the secret of humility, a secret about which the most loquacious Saints have succeeded in saying nothing. Attempting to define Saintliness, he writes tranquilly: "I think that it is called pride and also humility."

But even if I refuse to judge the ethic of Saintliness, I look at it through Genet's eyes, and I know that it is his only way out. Then, these quibbles and this procedure move me as does a cry of pain. They are a passionate casuistry. But if I stand away from it and, ceasing to regard it as the subtlest stratagem of this Ulysses, if I see it as an anonymous ethic that is offered up amongst many others, and without any recommendation, I immediately condemn

it. And *in every shape and form.* Our decent folk are deeply moved by St. Labre, but they are slightly repelled by the befouled tongue of Marie Alacoque. But, after all, she nursed the sick. Besides, the French bourgeois doesn't dislike shit, provided it is served up to him at the right time;* he is "Rabelaisian," that is, he talks about purges and enemas while eating dessert and in his heart he merges the sexual organs with those of excretion. The gentleman from Poitiers who strolled through the corridors of his house wearing a bowler hat and sniffing at a full chamber pot is a saint of our bourgeoisie. As for myself, I am not as fond of shit as some people say I am. That is why I reject Saintliness wherever it manifests itself, among the canonized saints as well as in Genet;† and I smell it, even beneath their secular disguises, in Bataille, in Gide, in Jouhandeau. Always for the same reason, to wit, that it is, to my way of thinking, only the mystical bough of the generosity of consumption.

And besides, all this labor of the soul is, at least in the case of Genet, without any deep efficacy; it is all rhetoric. He lowers himself in order to elevate himself, but the elevation and the lowering remain symbolic. I am sure that he has betrayed very little, and mainly in thought. If he has betrayed more than I think he has, his treacherous acts would have ruined their victims without changing him. His whole system of Saintliness, as I have patiently expounded it, is based on the following principle: that betrayal effects a metamorphosis in the soul of the betrayer. If we are to believe Genet, he would destroy in order to destroy himself, would inform on his friend in order to make himself unworthy of loving, would descend, one by one, the rungs of the ladder of Evil. But the fact is that I don't believe him: he argues with himself, destroys himself sym-

* "The Frenchman . . . is an animal of Latin breed. He does not mind filth in his home, and in literature he is scatophagous. He is mad about excrement . . ." (Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare*).

† The friendly feeling of the bourgeois for his excrement, of Mr. Bloom for "his own smell," pushes our civilization of solitude and individualism to its ultimate consequences. The individual, abandoned, lost in an indifferent or hostile society, coils about himself and attempts to find recourse in immanence against impossible transcendence. This abject intimacy, which is often that of the married couple itself and of the family, originates in the fear of the *outside.* These organic odors, waste products, stale smells symbolize the closed unit (which lives by itself and on itself) that each individual or family group wishes to become for want of a social valorization and a *recognition* of the *person.* Coprophagy is probably not a widespread sexual vice, but the conjugal climate disposes people to it more or less everywhere. Amongst us, coitus does not differ much from the digestive functions; it prolongs them; the couple really tries to become a single animal that smells itself, broods over itself, sniffs at itself, touches itself with its eight groping paws and pursues in the dampness of the bed the sad dream of absolute immanence.

bolically, suffers in the abstract, forgets his suffering, is reborn of his ashes and goes off to love elsewhere. All this intense destructive activity takes place on the spot and without his moving a muscle. One always forgets that the soul is elastic. I can readily imagine this rhetorical whirlwind in Genet; I can also imagine these vain and irritating efforts to mimic remorse, suffering and destitution, these efforts to transform a nothingness of suffering into a suffering before nothingness. He does not suffer and suffers at not suffering, he therefore suffers and is delighted that he suffers, therefore he no longer suffers, then he is delighted at no longer suffering. He suffers: this is the feeling of his downfall; he was won. He does not even suffer: the reason is that he has fallen too low to suffer; again he has won. It all takes place in the monkish cell in which he has been locked up, and one must keep busy in a cell. These abasements are the exact counterpart of the spiritual elevations of monks. States of soul. Meanwhile, the world runs its course.

Dialectic of being and dialectic of doing, quietism and activism: the contradictions of this divided soul can best be compared to the latent conflict in any religious collectivity between salvation by works and salvation by faith.

For faith is not simple belief in the Supreme Being. It becomes a humble and passive awaiting of His coming. Moreover, would it seek Him if it had not already found Him? Could it await Him if He were not already there? It is God who awaits himself through the believer. It is God who will attain himself in the mystical ecstasy, which is a fusion of the Subject and the Object. There is thus nothing to do but to await the sudden fulguration that will fill us with *being,* that will make of our fleeting consciousness the sheath of God. Genet, who has a mystic sense of himself, beseeches himself and awaits himself. He is the swooning female worshiper who asks to be pierced by the divine sword. The language of the female saints has amazing erotic overtones. Mystical possession is, in their case, a sublimated dream of amorous possession. In Genet, who gives his body to the Pimps, those handsome embodiments of Evil and Eternity, it is amorous possession which is dreamt as mystical possession. Thus, his faith impels him toward a fundamental quietism. He hates action, which is so vain, so limited. When God becomes incarnate in the beloved, Genet mimes with his body radical passivity and the return to nothingness: his breath is taken away, his legs melt beneath him. Sacrificial lamb, victim of "the cruel bird," he collapses, he dies. The ceremony is completed in the

luminous darkness where the All and the Nothing coincide. Genet's amorous trances bring to mind irresistibly the swoons of Madame Guyon.

But all religions aim at governing our conduct. It is by action that we acquire merit, provided our intentions are pure and spring from the heart. It would be vain to seek God, to await Him; we are not in the world to enjoy Him but to serve Him. In order to acquire merit, we must try to forget that it is conferred by good deeds; we must act only for the love of God. Action, which is prescribed by a severe religion and which is prompt to show us our original downfall, calls for a certain hypocrisy: we must be unaware of what we know, must do Good for God alone when it is our Salvation that is our sole concern. If faith leads to quietism, the tense voluntarism of works leads to formal dryness, to Pharisaism. In any case, militant action, which is prescribed by sacred books, cannot be reconciled with passive waiting for God. Sadism or masochism, willful tension or abandon, dryness or effusion, discursive or intuitive reason, respect or love, militant or contemplative life, categorical imperative or passive beatitude: a choice must be made. One of these attitudes aims at the alienation, the disappearance, of the Ego, of freedom, of consciousness; the other, grounded in a kind of agnosticism, affirms with stubborn austerity the dignity of man, that finite creature, fallen but free. Yet they coexist in every religious syncretism; both are to be found in the most simple prayer, and the same words, "Lord, I will do thy bidding, I will be thy servant," are used for expressing them both. The same holds for Genet, who wants to find salvation by faith, by the abandoning of the I-subject to the I-object, and by works, by the militant achieving of Evil on earth. But he has taken the contradiction upon himself and has wished neither to underestimate it nor to resolve it. A spontaneous choice of taking himself in hand, of mastering his life, of espousing his destiny has been refracted in an impossible situation; he has had to express himself in two divergent directions. A second choice, a reflective choice, which is brought to bear on the first, has made this divergence more manifest: he has chosen to be this fundamental conflict, to exist simultaneously in two dimensions which are mutually exclusive, to explain himself at every moment by two frames of reference and to justify himself by two scales of value. And since he is playing the game of loser wins, let us say that he has decided to destroy himself at the same time by works and by faith. Genet's originality lies in his wanting to be and in his being the nonsynthetic unity of his contradictions.

We have assumed the existence of order in the chaotic richness of this mind and have attempted to examine separately the two dialectics which are fighting for it. We must now return to the disorder: since the characteristic of a "religious nature" is syncretism, it is in its syncretism that Genet's mind has to be studied. We must focus our attention on the nondifferentiation of what has actually been experienced, the interaction of the contradictory systems. Genet is eighteen years old, a thief, beggar, tramp, homosexual, traitor, evildoer, female saint, hidden divinity. He leaves prison to fall into the Court of Miracles and the Court of Miracles to return to prison. I have just made a chemical analysis of this divided soul: it must now be recomposed. I shall undertake to draw a portrait of Genet the adolescent.

## CAIN

*The eye was in the grave . . .*

I shall not dwell on his voluntarism. We know that this soul is utter will, even in the passive waiting for Good. It is no longer a matter of explaining Genet by his history or of deriving his attitudes and behavior from an original choice. I wish to describe him from within, as he appeared to himself at about the age of eighteen.

### *1. The Emotional Climate*

What can this child, who is not very fun-loving, and who is also deprived, find to love in life? Nothing, unless it be life itself. But he does not take it on the organic level. He refuses to abandon himself to the viscous chemistry of his body; he *does not love* his body. What he prizes above all is the self-awareness of consciousness. This frame of reference to which everything refers and which refers only to itself, this twofold aspect of thought which makes self-contact with certainty, is an absolute value. It is absolutely good that there are consciousnesses, in particular, that of Genet. Seeing, knowing, thinking are good. It is better to see than to be blind, to be blind than to be dead. The worst of misfortunes is still a stroke of luck, since one feels oneself living when one experiences it. Worries may cloud his optimism but no experience will challenge it, for it is prior to experience. It is one and the same as the passion for living, for being present and being aware of it, in the midst of all. This admirable and childish passion will save him. If life has not broken him, it is because he has always thought that nothing could hold a candle to life.

Life is made impossible for him. He was rushing toward the future with a spontaneous drive; the future, unalterably evil, breaks his drive. Genet gets into the habit, despite himself, of anticipating the worst; he continues to live only by sheer will, out of defiance, by fighting against the desire to die; he even asserts that he is dead. Has he lost his passion for living? Not at all. It has been put entirely into the austere undertaking to survive. The vital impulse which sustained a child's immediate desires has been blocked; it shifts its course and inflates the reflective consciousness. Genet directs to himself his feverish expectation, his curiosity, his confidence. His naïve, immediate consciousness, disappointed, thwarted, lacerated, groans with suffering. But there is a kind of enthusiasm and joy in the way he broods over it and listens to its groaning. He observes himself, spies on himself, works on himself with fiendish interest. When he feels hopeless, he becomes impassioned again; he is impassioned about his hopelessness. This child martyr knows every affliction except boredom. He has placed himself on the level of reflection in order to guide and, no doubt, understand himself and certainly also to place himself as high as he can above the rising tide of horror, but his chief concern is to hound himself.

Is it possible that he no longer ever has spontaneous desires, that he no longer ever dreams of a mitigation of his lot? Does this taut will never relax? And does this austere heart never feel the mad, youthful wish to exchange the martyr's palm for less difficult joys, for happiness? That would be too much to expect. Nobody achieves perfection, and, besides, this monstrous child is, after all, only a child. His childhood dreams are still close to him, and his optimism is so virulent that he sometimes has to defend himself against hope. Deep in his heart, the little hoodlum "with delicate tastes" has never ceased, will never cease, to long for all that life denies him: he is poor, and is filled with wonder by luxury; he is despised, and wants to assert himself by ostentatious generosity; he is an illegitimate child, and likes to imagine that he is the descendant of a great family: "Without thinking myself magnificently born, the uncertainty of my origin allowed me to interpret it. . . . My childhood imagination . . . invented for me (so that I might there squire about the slight and haughty person of an abandoned little boy) castles, parks peopled with guards rather than statues, wedding gowns, bereavements and nuptials." If he is willing to follow the natural course of his daydreams, they will help him to escape the dreadful reality of his life and to enter a vanished world: chivalry, heroic and lavish aristocracy, traditions, festivals. He

learns to love this feudal, monarchic society through cloak-and-dagger novels. His first idea of luxury is inspired by popular songs: "The severe, naked world of factory workers is entwined with marvels, the popular songs . . . and these songs have phrases which I cannot think of without shame if I know they are sung by the grave mouths of factory workers which utter such words as: succumb . . . tenderness . . . ravishing . . . garden of roses . . . villa . . . marble steps . . . sweethearts . . . dear love . . . jewels . . . crown . . . oh my queen . . . dear stranger . . . gilded room . . . lovely lady . . . flowered basket . . . treasure of flesh . . . golden waning . . . my heart adores you . . . maiden with flowers . . . color of the evening . . . exquisite and pink . . . in short, those fiercely luxurious words, words which must slash their flesh like a ruby-crested dagger." For all his persistent will to become a monster, Genet's sensibility remains fresh and naïve, with a certain folk quality. He is thrilled by a facile kind of poetry: "Diamonds, purple, blood, flowers, oriflammes, gold, crowns, necklaces, arms, garlands, palaces, the icy, gleaming poles of the revery of the people." He himself says of his imagination that it is "in love with royal pomp" and that it embellishes the world with "ideal gilt." Later, in prison, he will take delight in shopgirl dreams: "It was the period of sober luxury. Divine cruised the Mediterranean, then went even farther, to the Sunda Isles, in a white yacht. She was always forging ahead of herself and her lover, a young American, modestly proud of his gold. When she returned, the yacht touched at Venice, where a film director was taken with her. They lived for a few months through the huge rooms . . . of a dilapidated palace. Then it was Vienna, a gilded hotel, nestling beneath the wings of a black eagle. Sleeping there in the arms of an English lord, deep in a canopied and curtained bed. Then there were rides in a heavy limousine . . . and off again to an elegant Renaissance castle, in the company of Guy de Roburant. She was thus a noble chatelaine . . . then back to Paris, and off again, and all in a warm, gilded luxury, all in such comfort that I need merely evoke it from time to time in its snug details for the vexations of my poor life as a prisoner to disappear, for me to console myself, console myself with the idea that such luxury exists. . . . I invent for Divine the coziest apartments where I myself wallow."

Then come the ordeal, the reformatory, the hardening, the will to assume his abject situation. If he still indulges in his childish daydreams, it is because he now assigns them a precise function in his ceremonies of sacrifice. These naïve desires help him to suffer. He cajoles them because he knows that they must remain unsatis-

fied. He abandons himself to dreams because the more gilded they are the more painful is the awakening. Their value for him lies in their making the horror of his condition more real. Were it not for these violent and spontaneous demands, he would perhaps put up with his wretchedness, he would wallow in it, he would resign himself. But the expiatory victim must be panting and horrified when it is led to the sacrifice. In order for his abnegation to have greater value, he must reject suffering with all his might. He now has other wishes: "The atmosphere of the planet Uranus is said to be so heavy that the ferns there are creepers; the animals drag along, crushed by the weight of the gases. I want to mingle with these humiliated creatures which are always on their bellies. If metempsychosis should grant me a new dwelling place, I choose that forlorn planet. I inhabit it with the convicts of my race." The *man* Genet has chosen himself. He therefore fears lest an unforeseen stroke of luck, an inopportune wave of happiness, weaken the inflexible severity of his choice. After relating how a little stolen money gave him for a moment the right to live like everyone else, he adds: "However, I was held back by my ingrained habit of living with my head bowed and in accordance with an ethic contrary to the one which governs the world. In short, I was afraid of losing the benefit of my laborious and painful efforts in the direction opposite to yours." He does not want his childhood wishes to be fulfilled; he retains them as wounds. The desires that well up in his immediate consciousness aim at being satisfied, but his *reflection* is delighted that this satisfaction is always denied them.

All his feelings are thus of a reflective nature. In each of them we find the curious symbiosis of a spontaneous desire which impels itself toward the world with naïve confidence and of a parasitic mental state whose only support and only food is the primary state which it directs, contradicts, adulterates and maneuvers. These twinned feelings are rare among simple souls, more frequent among the sophisticated. Thus, one can love and be ashamed of loving—and be all the more ashamed the more one loves. For Genet, reflective states of mind are the rule. And although they are of an unstable nature in everyone, in him they have even less equilibrium because the reflection is always contrary to the reflected feeling. He suffers and delights in suffering because he wants to defy his tormentors and because he sees in his sufferings the proof of his election. He is ashamed and he is proud of his shame. Is it joy that prevails or grief? Shame or pride? We find in him for the first time —but not the last—the ambiguous structures, the false unities, in

which the two terms of a contradiction relate back and forth to each other in an infernal dance. I shall refer to these hereafter as whirligigs. He oscillates from a suffering in which the joy is only verbal to a joy in which the suffering is only an emotional abstraction. His consciousness is filled with empty assertions: I am joyful, I want to be joyful, I must be joyful. But frequently, too, equilibrium is achieved. Stress is spontaneously placed in the reflective consciousness, and, as we have seen, it is in this consciousness that all Genet's optimism has taken refuge. Consequently, since the best of himself and the maximum intensity of lighting are to be found in the reflective consciousness, the reflected consciousness wilts slightly, loses some of its brilliancy. It becomes merely a buffer between reflection and the world, a gelatinous transparency which makes external dangers less threatening. Genet sees the world through a windowpane. He may suffer dreadfully, but there will always be something cozy about his suffering because his consciousness caresses itself. He witnesses his misfortunes; he is present at them. Often, in fact, he relates them to himself, magnifying them in the telling. The interior of his mind is a consciousness stuffed with itself, like the prunes of Tours.

The basic component of these ambiguous states of mind is amazement, a fixed perplexity in the face of the misfortunes which tirelessly exceed his hope. Try as he may to look reality squarely in the face, he sometimes wonders whether he is dreaming: the real has an aftertaste of nightmare. But his amazement is mainly reflexive: Genet and the sphinx in a single person. Can one imagine the strange flavor that this consciousness has for itself? "Who am I? Why do I alone suffer so much? What have I done to be here? Who has destined these ordeals for me?" There is an answer to all these questions, there cannot fail to be an answer: that is what arouses his optimism. In fact, he himself is the answer; he will find it in finding himself. At every moment he perceives his own Ego as a vocation, as a call, as an expectation that will be fulfilled, as a promise that will be kept, as a suffering that will obtain for him eminent merits. But *who* calls him? *Who* will count his merits for him? *What* promise has been made? To whom? He sometimes falls into so deep a state of wonder that he thinks he is going to lose consciousness. In the Mettray mess hall he remains with his fork in the air, looking into space, forgetting to eat. To such a degree that the director of the reformatory, who has received a report from the supervisors, thinks it advisable to have him examined by a psychiatrist.

Nevertheless, his states of amazement are proof of his mental health. Contemporary writers think they have discovered the absurdity of the world and of man in the world. Genet is at the opposite pole of their conception. A man who considers life absurd does not dream of being surprised at his individual misfortunes; he regards them as confirmation of his theoretical views. But if Genet is astounded by the course of the world, it is precisely because events seem to him to have a meaning. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus mentions some of the trivial experiences which sometimes reveal to us the fundamental absurdity of our condition: there are days when my best friend appears to me a stranger; what seems to me absurd, in this case, is that this stranger knows me intimately, that I have obligations to him. This is precisely the kind of experience that Genet does not have: his lovers and tormentors do not disconcert him because of their absurdity, but because of their *strangeness.*

As Camus sees it, the thin crust of meaning sometimes melts, disclosing the raw reality which signifies nothing. In the eyes of Genet, it is reality which tends to be effaced in favor of meaning. A given Pimp is an angel, a given guard is another. The word "angel"—which we encounter frequently in Genet's early works, and increasingly less thereafter—must be given its original meaning. An angel, an *angelos:* someone has sent him to Genet. Unfortunately, things and people are words of a foreign language. It always seems to him that they are assembled into sentences which speak about him, but he understands nothing of what he is told. In short, metaphysical intuition of the absurd leads to nominalism; that of Genet orients him toward a vague, Platonic realism.

Genet, a strange phenomenon in the universe, sees the universe as strange. Experience reveals to him in every object, in every event, the presence of *something else;* he senses the *supernatural.* And is it not precisely the sacred which thus manifests itself through the profane without ever letting itself be touched? The world is sacred because it gives an inkling of a meaning that escapes us. And Genet, an enigma that requires a solution, is himself sacred in a sacred world. The life of this adolescent is an uninterrupted experience—accompanied by horror, by amazement, by hope—of the Sacred within him and outside of him. That is probably what we shall have the greatest difficulty in understanding, for our consciousness has been secularized. Piece by piece, our life has been torn away from religion. For the more zealously devout, there are religious sectors and profane sectors. Genet constantly experiences the sacred

in its ambivalence.* Since his optimism passionately rejects the absurdity of the universe, Genet's apparition, like his history, must present a meaning. He was born in order to manifest. By the manner in which he becomes aware of his being-in-the-world, he distinguishes himself from both the young bourgeois who knows that he is a *man by divine right* and the young worker who feels in his very bones that he has the contingency of a weed. Like the former, Genet feels his being as a *being-born-for*. . . . The dreadful and ceremonious circumstances of his birth are sufficient to dismiss any idea of contingency. He has been born *in order* to be abandoned, rejected, placed in the hands of strangers. Nevertheless, like the worker, he knows that he is exiled from that formidable culture center which is bourgeois society. But this very exile must have a meaning. All his misfortunes prove to him that he is *doomed*. He is called to account for all his gestures, all his feelings; he is responsible for himself and for the world; but he does not know in whose eyes this responsibility is manifested. He is the *oblate*. If you want to sense his inner tension, the urgent, racing rhythm of its duration, imagine him as an expiatory victim who is being led to the place of sacrifice and whose heart is torn between horror and enthusiasm.

## 2. *The External World*

Even a life which has been dedicated unreservedly to the sacred has its profane moments. But Genet is silent about those moments. He barely experiences them and absent-mindedly lets them go by. Although he has to dress and walk and eat and work, he absents himself and plunges into his meditations. Unless objects or events speak to him expressly of his martyrdom, he feels only indifference for what is around him. He *does not see* landscapes, even the most beautiful in the world. He *does not enjoy himself* amidst others who are having a gay time. He does not know sensual pleasure, for it presupposes an abandon of which he is no longer capable. Cold, courteous, secret, ceremonious, he makes himself suspect to all and takes as much pleasure in displeasing people as in charming them: his priestliness isolates him.

One may think that he is unaware of reality. But not at all, for

* "In commenting upon Vergil's phrase *auri sacra fames*, Servius (*Ad Aen.*, III, 75) points out . . . that *sacer* can mean both 'accursed' and 'holy.' Eustathius (*Ad Iliadem*, XXIII, 429) observes the same double meaning of *haghios*, which can express at the same time the notion of 'pure' and 'soiled.' And this same ambivalence of the sacred appears in the Paleosemitic . . . and Egyptian world." Mircéa Eliade, *Histoire des religions*, Payot, p. 27.

nothing can prevent its being present for all of us in its entirety and our being steeped in it. Genet perceives *all* of it, like everyone else. Does anyone think that Genet sees this chair, this sky, otherwise than we, that he goes up a flight of stairs any differently than we do? His perception *must indeed* be as full as ours; even his remoteness derives its particularity from the situation in which he finds himself: one turns one's mind away *from* this or *from* that: it is the prison that gives the escape its form. No, the difference lies elsewhere. On the level of signification. For us, most of the objects around us manifest an organization which refers to precise ends and finally to man himself: a city is only a collection of tools arranged in fitting order, it reflects to us the image of human reality; to Genet it signifies his exclusion from the human race; things *do not speak* to him.

1. *Tools.*—We are surrounded by utensils which have been manufactured by and for men and whose final end is any man. The industrial products that make up the urban landscape are the social will bottled and canned; they speak to us of our integration in society; men address us through the silence of these products: they are injunctions, recommendations, sometimes questionings or explanations; a new tool is the reverse of a new gesture. The gesture is described in a leaflet of instructions that we are given with the tool; when we perform it for the first time, we are engaging in a ceremony: the just man who uses a new corkscrew or the latest type of can opener plunges into the fine heart of society, perceives, through the object, the manufacturer, the merchant, the jurist, who advise, suggest, command delightfully. It is out of love of man that Americans buy gadgets, for the pleasure of hearing the sermonizing voice of the specialist ring out in the solitude of their apartments, of their lives; tools veil from us our forlornness.

Tools have nothing to command or forbid the disintegrated, vagabond element, the wandering individual who is Jean Genet. Of course, he is not unaware of them. He has read the notice tacked on the wall, he knows that the mat at the foot of the steps is a request that he wipe his feet. In fact, he will obey the injunction. But his act is only a feint: what does he care about leaving muddy footprints on the stairs when he has come to break into an apartment on the fourth floor? The mat was put there by a just man for other just men, by an owner for other owners: "Please leave this place as clean as you expect to find it when you enter." Genet will rub the soles of his shoes on the horsehair of the mat, but he does so in order to pretend to be one of the just, so as not to attract the jani-

tor's attention. The low wall that encloses a field or an orchard cannot *prevent* one's entering: it *forbids* one to enter. But the prohibition is all right for the others, for the strollers who have never been in trouble with the police; for the hounded thief it loses all meaning. Nevertheless, it is there; he sees it; he cannot fail to see it, just as he sees on the sign which suddenly looms up in the woods where he is hiding the injunction not to smoke. Strange demands which confirm him in his generality as a human being and which are neutralized at the same time by the ban cast on his particularity as a thief. The wooden fence, the dead tree that may catch fire, the field through which a borderline runs, are rigid, upright thoughts, thoughts which are still human but which have no living bond with men, which have been frozen by a taboo; they speak to Genet of the lost paradise, of the Eden where even prohibitions bring men closer together. They perhaps evoke in him a desire to obey, to *do* as others do, to be *like everyone else*. But obedience would be vain and harmful. A burglar who was being chased by a fireman entered a public park. He saw a big lawn with a sign forbidding access to it: "Keep off the grass." The burglar had a longing for order: he went around the lawn. The fireman took the shortcut and caught him. Genet will not be so stupid: he ignores the reminders that are set all along the way, that gleam for a moment and then fade out. Yet, in a certain sense, they do not concern him: each of them is a reminder of his exile, each of them seeks in him the social man, the just man, and does not find him. All these frozen indexes show him in his abjection, in his guilt. Through them the society of the just *looks at* the guilty man; things have become the inert support of men's gazes. I am quite familiar with that sullen gaze: at a time when I was overworking, it pursued me everywhere, I was being hounded. Windows were eyes; I was entering a field of absolute visibility in which the magical identity of the gaze and the light was achieved. A dead gaze, a dead light. I looked for the source of the gaze and saw only windows. Windows with something added: the cold, livid brilliance of a petrified transcendency. Genet is the chosen victim of these mineral gazes. In short, the finality of utensils arraigns him.

What will he do? Will he flee those scornful looks? Not by a long shot. He is going to react. But how? Three ways lie open to the exile, three only. Genet takes all three simultaneously.

The first—the simplest—is to take upon himself the exile that is imposed upon him. Rejected by things, the outcast rejects them in turn, that is, he lies beside them like a thing, like a corpse. He

replaces practical and technical connections with things by relationships of simple contiguity. I shall call this his attempt at quietism. We already know that Genet simulates death and aspires to contemplate the activities of decent people from his grave. He thereby deliberately deprives himself of all means of understanding the human enterprise. Of course he continues to be aware of practical ends: he knows that such-and-such a manufacturer aims at producing in greater quantity and at lower cost, that certain workmen are striking for higher pay, that certain consumers are uniting against retailers in order to buy goods at wholesale, that certain groups are fomenting an insurrection so as to seize power. But since he contemplates the world "from the realm of the obscene (which is outside the scene of this world)," since he refuses to be integrated into the human undertaking, the end that men pursue and the values that they pose appear to him as simple *facts*. It is a fact that certain men want to command, that others want to found a family. What of it? Human ends are dead, they float with their bellies up. Petrified ends, ends corroded from below, invaded by materiality, seen from without by an angel or a beast, ends *for others,* for a zoological species to which the quietist does not belong. Thereupon, the instruments rebel: each goes its own way. If it is no longer entirely obvious that one must get up every morning, must dress, must be neat, then a pin appears as an implement which is both too familiar and inscrutable: "I had the revelation of an absolute perception as I considered, in the state of luxurious detachment of which I have been speaking, a clothespin left on a line. The elegance and oddness of this familiar little object *appeared before me without astonishing me.*" For a man who observes with indifference that the children of others go to school, a bus becomes a huge, absurd hornet whose idiotic task is to ingurgitate and pour out an interrupted stream of travelers. It becomes strange and comical that "the bus, which was full of serious and hurried people, would courteously stop at the diminutive sign of a child's fingers." Since Genet refuses to participate in men's effort to create an *antiphysis,* the bus reverts to nature, it is a voluminous assemblage of metal and dead wood. Not quite, however: since a man who has left his class and cannot return to it is called a déclassé, I would say that there are, for the quietist, declassed minerals. They have been exiled from the mineral kingdom by a kind of malediction: the stamp of man. When Genet considers the "rolling stock" which is going downhill, he places himself first only at the viewpoint of *physis:* from this point of view, that moving body should obey the law of gravity. If it stops

because a young, hairless animal has lifted a finger, that is an absurd little miracle, a laughable suspension of natural laws. The stop would, indeed, have meaning only from a human outlook. But quietism is a symbolic destruction of the human. "I felt I was perceiving things with blinding lucidity. Even the most trivial of them had lost their usual meaning, and I reached the point of wondering whether it was true that one drank from a glass or put on a shoe." Tools float between Nature, which cannot produce them by herself, and the realm of man, which the quietist does not want to see. We have noted that Genet used language in reverse; this inversion now extends to the universe.

One can assume this sulking attitude for a moment; one cannot maintain it permanently. Even at Mettray one has to eat, to dress, to undress. If quietism were carried to an extreme, it would mean death. Besides, in effacing the signification of tools, Genet runs the risk of effacing the reality of the world. His abstentionism with respect to action changes into absenteeism in relation to being. Motionless, quiet, hardly breathing, I no longer have any way of distinguishing being from appearing. One starts by wondering "whether it is true that one drinks from a glass" and one ends by no longer knowing whether the glass exists. As a result of not testing the real by action, one does not know its consistency; the world becomes merely a flat, kaleidoscopic multiplicity. Genet has at times a wild desire to do violence to the indifference of being, to act, and, since he is forbidden to do so along common lines, then let it be by havoc. He will know the density of being through the effort required to destroy it. He will steal, will smash, will waste in order to gouge all those eyes that are watching him. Theft is not only a means of livelihood, it is a sacred destruction. In a burglary, one must rip fences, break open doors, elude traps, kill dogs, allay the suspicion of watchmen. If all goes well, one *enters a man,* for the gaping, defenseless apartment, naked and paralyzed, is a man. It reflects a person, his tastes, his ways, his vices: "I do not think specifically of the proprietor of the place, but all my gestures evoke him. . . . I am steeped in an idea of property while I loot property. I re-create the absent proprietor. He lives, not facing me, but about me. He is a fluid element which I breathe, which enters me, which inflates my lungs." It is not enough to says that one rapes this live, fluid person: one mutilates him. Gloved hands ransack that open belly, pluck out the liver, grab a knickknack, a family heirloom. This rape which is followed by murder is symbolic: thieves are so aware of this that they want to achieve it in their flesh. Turn the

pages of Genet's works at random: such-and-such a burglar gets an erection when he steals,* another vomits on the banknotes that he takes from a drawer. "Guy almost always sits down and eats in the kitchen or the looted drawing room. Some burglars go to the can after ransacking the place." They are miming destruction in a kind of cathartic crisis. Then, a new destruction begins: the stolen object was, before the larceny, at its maximum power, unique, priceless; it was defined by its consumer value, by its integration into the objective person that an apartment is, by the family's devotion to it. The thief practices upon it an operation which is the inverse of appropriation: he converts the consumer value into exchange value: "I tore his watch from the buttonhole of his vest where it was held by a chain. 'It's a souvenir,' he murmured. 'That's just it. I like souvenirs.' I smashed him in the face." At that point there begins a series of drops in potential: disguised, the object becomes anonymous; it loses its inner substance, its inner life; transformed into money, it becomes for the thief a pure and impersonal purchasing power. In addition, the "fence" pays less for it than it is worth; if the sum must then be shared by accomplices, the degradation is complete: there is no longer any relationship, not even a quantitative one, between the jade Buddha that was once brought back to the head of the family by his naval officer grandfather, and the four or five banknotes in the thief's pocket. It should also be added that the money which has been acquired is unproductive: no investment is possible, no capitalization that is the source of new creations. It is squandered, it goes up in smoke. Thus, theft is a destructive operation that ends in the radical liquidation of the stolen object, in the disorganization of a whole, in an impoverishment of the human world. Now, our acts draw our portrait in being; the *created* object presents to the creator his own person in the realm of the objective. But to destroy is to create nothingness. In constructing, I externalize myself really among beings; destruction represents the resorption of the universe into myself. The Louis XVI drawing room which Genet has just entered signifies "French bourgeoisie"; it is *the* French bourgeoisie which piratically took over the furniture of a ruined aristocracy; our bourgeois society, with its values, myths and ceremonies, is present in its entirety in the driftwood of this memorable wreck. Genet, forcing drawers and breaking the panes of consoles, wants to attain the being of the bourgeoisie. In like manner, Caligula required that

* Bulkaen declared: "When I break into an apartment, I get a hard-on, I lubricate" *(Miracle of the Rose).*

the Senate have only one head so as to be able to cut it off with a single stroke. The bourgeoisie has only one drawing room, *is* only one drawing room. Genet will be the gravedigger of the European bourgeoisie. Since the others, the just, define themselves by their operation, since they are called masons, carpenters, architects, why should he not be defined by his? The truth of the constructor is the constructed object: Genet aspires to find his truth in the object he destroys; he thinks he is transformed into a proprietor by the negation of all property: "The decision [to leave the place of the theft] is born when the apartment contains no more secret corners, when I have taken the proprietor's place." And he writes as follows about Bulkaen, a petty burglar who likes to be called Kid Jewel: "It may well be that Bulkaen was in his own eyes only a constellation, or, if one prefers, the constellation of the jewels he had stolen. And that heightened the beauty of his icy flame." The honest woman owns jewels, she adorns herself with them. Bulkaen, who is excluded from the society of the just, cannot have them: he becomes a jewel himself. But this is a delusion: he imagines that the objects he destroys or disperses *change into his own substance* as food changes into the substance of the one who consumes it. The fact is that they do not, for there is no assimilation here. The image is misleading. It is true that the stolen objects reflect to him his being, but as they glide off into nothingness, the being which they reflect to him is in the process of *gradually disappearing.* The acts of destruction which he performs define him in his own eyes as a faceless force, an increasingly naked power, an increasingly abstract terror. The degree of degradation of his activity is exactly the same as that to which the object on which it operates is demolished. It moves, at the same time as the object, from the complex to the simple and from the living to the inanimate. It is a warlike fury when it is directed against a man, a senile and mechanical violence when the man is dead and it keeps hacking at his corpse. In the end, exhaustion lays the murderer out beside his victim: the murder is a suicide.

These ways are dead ends. In vain does Genet turn away from the world of instruments: he transforms being into appearances, everything escapes him, he drifts toward death. In vain does he then turn upon tools in order to force their inner resistance: he succeeds only in breaking them and in being changed into formless violence; society reorganizes itself elsewhere with its prohibitions and its utensils.

There remains the third way. A utensil, as we have seen, is the

crystallization of a collective imperative which addresses itself within us to the average man, to the *uomo qualunque,* to the ordinary member of the community, and which requires conventional acts whose main characteristic is generality: *one* detaches the paper by cutting along the dotted line. Now, it so happens that, by a curious perversion of the course of the world, the *general* exigency of the tool relates to the solitary and the outlaw in their individuality. In being refracted through certain rigorously particular situations, the universal "instructions for use" present themselves to Genet as a queer, hybrid, half-individual, half-collective imperative, as an order which is no longer given to anyone or by anyone and which nevertheless remains an objective solicitation, which is not reducible to the simple reflection of an individual desire: "It was the sisters' clothes that gave Culafroy the idea of running away. All he had to do was to put into action a plan that the clothes conceived by themselves." To the nuns, these garments propose traditional acts which were long ago determined by the Church. Through them and through the intermediary of the dressmakers who made them, all of Christian society addresses itself to the sisters. Every morning they find in their robes the image of their sacrifice and of their dignity; the garments reflect to them their integration into the community of Christ and their rejected, neglected, yet ever-present femininity. Culafroy, as a prisoner, as a young boy, has nothing to do with a skirt and a coif. Nevertheless, he lights up these objects with his guilty desires: as a prisoner, he wishes to escape; as a boy, he dreams of a secret femininity. Society responds to his wishes with a twofold prohibition: thus, it is not society that addresses itself to him through the intermediary of these garments. And yet social exigencies, animated by his desires, begin, all by themselves, to concern him. The buttons are there to be buttoned, the skirt to be slipped on. Buttoned *by him,* slipped on *by him.* At the very moment when these imperatives address themselves to Culafroy, they cease to be social by becoming objective. They are secret solicitations—valid for him alone—that are born spontaneously of the garments. The gown and the headdress outline the image of a false femininity and of an escape without danger. The gesture is in the thing; it waits; it is a magical power. If Culafroy dresses up as a nun, he will be possessed by outlandish behavior; an outcast and homosexual nun will establish herself within him to govern his movements. But he will know the perverse joy of turning against men their own instruments. In order to escape from the just, the most decried of children uses the sacred

garments that the just respect. The ideal thing would be to kill a blacksmith with his own hammer.

At times one almost does that: a complex system of gestures and tools takes shape before the outlaw's eyes and suggests to him an act of destruction. An old man suffocates in Our Lady's presence, a pair of hands try to loosen a necktie. The just will see in this spectacle only an occasion for helping, for affirming human solidarity. In a highly integrated society, the major ends are common to all, and the goal that others have set up becomes an exigency for each individual. The tie *must* be loosened, the tool must be repaired, readapted to its function. For the entire society, an instrument that has deteriorated is a disgrace that must be eliminated instantly; the fate of mankind, of *homo faber,* is at stake symbolically in every automobile that has broken down, in every airplane accident, in every watch that is out of order. But Our Lady, a pariah, a fairy, doubly excluded from the collectivity, perceives the act in reverse. His mad, obscure desire to destroy society becomes embodied in the rebellious object. He is in sympathy with the constricting necktie, not with the hands that loosen it. If a child drowns, Our Lady is the water that engulfs him; if a woman cries "Fire," Our Lady is the flame that licks and bares her. For the outlaw, an object becomes a tool the very moment an accident makes it unusable and harmful to others. The broken instrument is outside the law; among all the airplanes of a standard model, the one that goes down in flames is a black sheep; the outlaw becomes embodied in cars whose steering gear breaks, in horses that bolt, in masts that come crashing down on the decks of ships, in all utensils that turn against their creators and are all the more dangerous in that they have been granted more power. Our Lady lends the tie a hand, he helps it strangle the old man.

The exceptional gestures, which are acts in reverse, envelop the universal and that which challenges it. The social imperative inhabits them but in reverse, having become the magical exigency of things. They turn to account the work of others in order to destroy, and the useful in order to engender the gratuitous. Absurd even in the eyes of the one who makes them, they are, like the evil impulses of which Baudelaire speaks in *The Glazier,* the manifestation of the other, of the Devil in person. Genet calls them poetical: "Harcamone's crimes—the murder of the little girl, in the past, and, more recently, the murder of the guard—will appear to be idiotic acts. Certain slips of the tongue enlighten us about ourselves, replacing one word by the other, and this untoward word is a word whereby

poetry escapes and perfumes the phrase. The words are a danger to the practical understanding of the statement. Similarly, certain acts in life."

Perhaps this poetic and demoniacal utilization is the only true relationship that the exile can maintain with the instruments and property of the society that exiles him. But it should be observed that these occasions are very rare. They can thus define only a quite exceptional relationship of man with things. And, in addition, the evildoer abdicates to the advantage of things; it is the things which indicate the gesture to be performed and it is the man who becomes their tool: Our Lady strangles on behalf of the tie. The gesture he performs is nobody's, above all not his: the destructive power of a tight slipknot has installed itself in his fingers, knots them around a throat and tightens them. He will be able to say, like Green Eyes: "It was fatality that took the form of my hands."

In short, the tools surrounding him are congealed, crystallized values that continually manifest to him his exile: they are human ethics graven in the inertness of matter; if he tries to break down their resistance, he succeeds only in destroying them; he can, at times, believe that he has used them, but it is actually they which have used him. A choice must be made: Genet will destroy the object if he takes hold of it; he will let himself be destroyed if the object takes hold of him.

2. *Nature.*—Will he at least have commerce with the great natural forces? Is not Nature precisely the region of being which man has not yet been able or never will be able to reduce to the state of tool? Since men have driven him out, it is for the inhuman solitudes to welcome him.

No. Nature is a utensil too. And it is social: "He [Feuerbach] does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society. . . . Even the objects of the simplest 'sensuous certainty' are only given him through social development, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by the action of a definite society in a definite age provided for the evidence of Feuerbach's 'senses.' "*

That is exactly how the just man usually sees nature, that is, when he is a city dweller and reads statistics in his newspaper.

* Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. Translated by W. Lough. Revised and edited by Roy Pascal. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1942, p. 35.

"Landscape" is viewed as "land." Land is defined by its resources; its configuration is accounted for by the property system and agricultural techniques; the animals that live on it are transformed into cattle; the famous solitude of the country is merely a lesser density, a deplorable effect of the exodus to the cities, a situation which can be remedied by appropriate means.

But several times a year the urban communities of honest folk decide in common—taking into account the necessities of economic life—to change their attitude toward the big farming areas. On a given date, town society expands, plays at disintegration; its members betake themselves to the country where, under the ironic eyes of the workers, they are metamorphosed for a while into pure consumers. It is then that Nature appears. What is she? Nothing other than the external world when we cease to have technical relations with things. The producer and the distributor of merchandise have changed into consumers, and the consumers change into meditators. Correlatively, reality changes into a setting; the just man on vacation *is there,* simply there, in the fields, amidst the cattle; reciprocally, the fields and the cattle reveal to him only their simple *being-there.* That is what he calls perceiving life and matter in their absolute reality. A country road between two potato patches is enough to manifest Nature to the city dweller. The road was laid out by engineers, the patches are tilled by peasants. But the city dweller does not see the tilling, which is a kind of work that remains foreign to him. He thinks that he is seeing vegetables in the wild state and mineral matter in a state of freedom. If a farmer goes across the field, he will make a vegetable of him too. Thus, Nature appears at the horizon of the seasonal or weekly variations of our society; it reflects to the just their fictive disintegration, their temporary idleness, in short their paid vacations. They wander through the undergrowth as through the damp, tender soul of the children they once were; they consider the poplars and plane trees planted on the roadside; they find nothing to say about them since they do nothing about them, and they are astonished at the wonderful quality of this silence. If they seek Nature on the outside, they do so, in reality, in order to touch their own depths. The quiet growth of the forest reflects to them the image of a blind and sure finality; it makes them feel that social life is a surface disturbance. There is an order of the instincts that does not differ basically from the order of the world and that can be found in oneself when one abandons oneself to a sweet, silent swoon in the presence of plant life. But childhood itself is social; the powerful natural instincts

which they seek in the depths of their heart are only the symbol of the legitimacy of their birth. The natural order which they perceive outside of and within themselves is quite simply the social order. Nature is a social myth; solitary self-enjoyment in the bosom of Nature is a ritual moment of life in society; the sky, the water, and the plants merely reflect to the just the image of their good conscience and of their prejudices.

Driven from Society, Genet is also driven from Nature. This homunculus who is a by-product of social chemistry, who spends his life all alone in the presence of all, has never felt natural. He dwells, of course, in the midst of the world: he has to, since he lives. He sometimes walks on the roads, wanders through the fields. But even if he is in the open country, he remains in exile. The site refuses to contain him, he is nowhere. He sees nature in reverse, and it appears to him bristling with human meanings. There would be no point in his seeking in it a refuge against man, for it is a big domesticated animal, a servant of the just. It is man whom he touches in the moss, whom he perceives in the vague movement of the foliage. This movement flees him; it will reflect to others the vacancy of their souls; it will represent for others leisure and abandon. Nature is the property of the others. In this road which, for the city dweller on vacation, is only a quiet flow, a solidified stream, Genet sees first the labor of the workers who condemn him; in the plants which grow in the fields, he sees that of the country folk who have driven him out. Everything is possessed, worked, occupied, from the sky to the subsoil. That which nobody owns belongs to the Nation, that community of decent people who reject him. It is not only the urban landscape but the entire universe that decomposes before his eyes into a collection of manufactured objects. Exile gives this child a mode of perceiving Nature which renders things artificial. This signifies that the "sensuous certainty"—which is at the same time a quiet self-certainty—remains foreign to him. In the flora of suburbs—he rarely gets far away from cities—he sees the product of human labor; the cherry tree is a social *act;* the very forest speaks of man: it is the property of a great lord, it is a reserve of firewood, it is a "national park" that the State takes under its protection. This tract of land is cut in two by an ideal line: the *frontier.* For Genet, this line is the essential thing, the tract is only a prop: on the other side of the line he will cease to be guilty; another society is going to welcome him. He deciphers meanings that are encrusted in bark or stone. In the very air there are meanings that float about, midway between the condensation of human

thoughts and the scattered evanescence of natural events. Customs officers are hiding at the approaches to these frontiers, the wheat fields conceal policemen: no more is needed, all nature smacks of man. These meanings become sense organs: flowers are ears of policemen, trees have a gaze. Later, the words "await," "attentive," "attention," will characterize for him the mute, motionless kingdoms of the vegetable and the mineral: "The trees were caught, motionless, *attentive,* deathly pale and naked, captured by a net of hair or the singing of a harp." Thorns are "studded with black eyeballs." The water of a river "rolls with such solemnity that one would have thought it was delegated by the gods to render perceptible the slow course of the drama." Here is "the motionless foliage of the plane trees . . . animated by the very spirit of tragic waiting." Here is a day of mourning: "Perhaps the sun set and rose several times, but a kind of fixity—which was mainly in the gaze—made people, animals, plants and objects remain awake with flawless lucidity. Each object preserved within itself a motionless time from which sleep was banished. It is not in exceeding twenty-four hours that this day is lengthened: it draws out the moments, and each thing observes them with such attention that one feels nothing can get by. The trees in particular want to surprise: their immobility infuriates me. . . . The toothbrush glass of the colonel's wife makes its crystal observe a deeper self-communion. It listens. It registers. The trees can toss about, shake their feathers in the wind, they can growl, fight, sing, this agitation is deceptive: they are on the watch." As for night, it is at times a black light that dissolves him in the nothingness of things uncreate, an elementary consciousness which thinks him not as a finite mode but in the primitive lack of differentiation of infinite substance: he takes shelter in it as in a heart, no other can see him. Not that he is invisible; he is visible only to the calm, nocturnal gaze that spreads him like an ink spot on a great dark curtain and plunges him into his native "sweet confusion." At other times, Night denudes him: he alone is phosphorescent and scintillates against a black background, visible to the infinite and for the infinite. In any case, whatever the moods he ascribes to Nature, he is never alone there: he pursues his dialogue with the Just by means of new symbols.

There are times, however, when this strange gaze, which is both natural and social, petrifies or "vegetablizes" him. One can recognize in Genet the "Medusa complex" of which Bachelard speaks in connection with Huysmans and which he defines as "the way of sharing in the contemptuous hardness of stone by living, sym-

pathetically as it were, the antipathy of hard matter, by making oneself a hard and indifferent matter." This "petrifying reverie," the origin of which is anger and resentment, can assume two distinct forms, one "extrovert," the other "introvert." It is, of course, introversion that characterizes Genet's reveries. To be sure, he retains "the desire to impose the immobility of stone upon the hostile world," but the stress is laid on the petrification that has been undergone. "Inland, I went through landscapes of sharp rocks that gnawed the sky and ripped the azure. This rigid, dry, malicious indigence flouted my own and my human tenderness. Yet it incited me to hardness. I was less alone upon discovering in nature one of my essential qualities: pride. I wanted to be a rock among rocks. I was happy to be one, and proud. Thus did I hold to the soil. I had my companions. I knew what the mineral kingdom was."

The "introverted reverie of petrification" leads us back, says Bachelard, "to the time when a father's gaze immobilized us." In the case of Genet, no father is involved. It leads us back to the moment of the original crisis. He was first petrified by the gaze of the Just. Genet might subscribe to the following verses of Pierre Emmanuel:

> . . . our limbs
> Are petrified in postures of sin
> Our gaze is a radiating of prayer.

At other times, beneath the gaze of plants, he has a sweet, passive dream of vegetablization. "I stopped shaving the down that Salvador found disagreeable, and began to look more and more like a mossy stalk." This is a homosexual dream. Soft, juicy, drooping stalk, defenseless against the fingers that break it in order to pick its flower. Genet, white and gentle, is lost in the undergrowth like a penis in pubic hair. The stiffness of the stalk, which is passive and slightly arched, is that of his prick in erection.

But, one may ask, in what way does he differ from the good citizen who devotes his vacation to changing himself into water, pebbles, sky and flowers? The difference is that the good citizen thinks that he effects his metamorphoses because he lives in sympathy with Nature; he modifies his inner rhythm; he falls into unison with the grass, the birds. But in the case of Genet, the universal gaze transforms him into a stone or a plant, which is a new way of signifying his exile. In the countryside, he is the Other for the rye and the wheat, for the stream, for the rocks "which flout him," just as he is, in cities, the Other for the passers-by. He plays the role of a rock

for an audience of rocks, that of a tuberose for a council of tuberoses, but always in Otherness, a stone in exile amidst stones, a bewitched plant in the heart of a forest, a tragedian who plays the role of a king before an audience of kings. Even if he becomes conscious of being a man amidst things, he does not do so directly, by testing his power to change the order of the world, but because their impenetrability, their stubborn muteness and the permanence of their gaze exclude him from their assembly and inform him of his humanness as a sentence of banishment. Man is the rock that is other than all rocks, the plant that is other than all plants, the rose "absent from any bouquet."

In its essence, Nature is a *gaze.* But it is also a *thing gazed at.* This watchful gaze has always been the object of a gaze. Not of Genet's gaze. Of a fundamental, objectifying, petrifying, absolute gaze, that of the Just.

Genet is hidden in a Czech forest; his eyes are on Poland; he is going to sneak across the border. The Poland which he is going to enter illegally is an empty apartment, out-of-doors; he breaks into it as if he were committing a burglary. But this golden plane is *seen;* customs officers are perhaps hiding in the rye fields. In any case, it is known, carefully watched by the police; it has been a subject of negotiations; the line which divides it was established by a treaty; and, lastly, it is implicitly present in the minds of all the Just: it is mentioned in geography books, it contributes to shaping the *physiognomy* of the Poland whose history, myths and culture have fixed its traits. Genet is going to plunge into this country which has already been seen, into this big reclining woman who has already been studied, already been judged, who is a subject of a hundred collective images, a subject that is going to contaminate him with its visibility. Hidden behind a tree, still invisible, he contemplates it with the gaze that the child turns on things already lit up by the gaze of its parents. He sees it in the process of being seen by French eyes: "The borderline ran through a field of ripe rye, the blondness of which was as blond as the hair of young Poles; it had the somewhat buttery sweetness of Poland, about which I knew that in the course of history it was always being hurt and sinned against." He finally makes up his mind, he stands up, he abandons his hiding place and enters a bath of visibility: he is making his way *into a myth.* In like manner, the actor who is smoking his pipe in the gray, dismal "greenroom" suddenly stands up: he is "on." He is going to plunge into Elsinore. That means he is entering the *déjà vu,* entering a phantasmagoria which is awaiting him and

which is *nothing* if not the vision of others. Genet enters Poland as Barrault enters Denmark every evening at twenty after nine. He is not entering a complex of real activities, a society of men who welcome him, but rather, as he admirably puts it, an image, the image that France has of Poland. "The crossing of the border and the excitement it aroused in me were to enable me to apprehend directly the essence of the nation I was entering. I was penetrating less into a country than to the interior of an image." Thereupon he becomes an image himself, for one cannot enter an image unless one makes oneself imaginary. An imaginary character of a Poland-as-martyr for an audience of just men (doubly symbolized by the customs officers who are perhaps hidden in the rye and by "the white eagle that soars invisible in the noonday sky"), he moves forward, highly visible on this eternally seen land, "with the certainty of being the heraldic character for whom a natural blazon has been shaped: azure, field of gold, sun, forest." He plunges—a future spy—into a handsome, blond, inanimate child and martyr, into the third fictive dimension of a tapestry. As he approaches the painted or woven trees, he feels himself dwindling and disappearing in the eyes of a motionless witness who sees him vanishing into the great natural appearance.

Whether it be a gaze or a setting, Nature escapes him. In any case, things are hollow; they flower in an incomprehensible medium which is called *sight.* They have lost their density, and the only characteristic which they have left, their objectivity, comes simply from the fact that they succeed each other *in the dream of another.* The natural gaze exiles him, metamorphoses him into water, into a tree, into a water that is always other, into a tree other than all trees. But a great major gaze envelops both Genet and nature, transforming the little thief into a figure in a stock image. Rejected *in truth* by the landscape, Genet can melt into it at times, but he does so in the realm of the imaginary.

3. *Miracles.*—Things do not speak to him: they look at him. He flees from the gaze of houses, shop windows, water, flowers; he has no access to the ordinary world. But there are spectacles and events which have no meaning and function for us other than to make us feel our exile or forlornness, in short, the limits of our powers. Genet feels himself designated by those spectacles and events. He discovers in them a finality which escapes us and which is intended only for him. We can understand his calling them *miracles:* they are the procession of sacred phenomena which accompany the predestined one and constantly remind him of his predestination. If

the reader has not forgotten what I have said about the ambivalence of the sacred, he will have realized that there are "miracles of horror" and "poetic miracles."

In the miracle of horror, the Sacred is revealed in its terrifying aspect. Miracles of horror: his visit to the French Consulate in Barcelona, his arrest in Spain and the joking of the cops who passed the tube of vaseline from hand to hand; miracles of horror: the pantomime of theft in the Yugoslav prison, the spitting game at Mettray. These are brief, lightning contacts with the world which draw him out of his absence and reveal to him his destiny. He was made to believe that his offenses would lead him to a penal colony or to death. He thus knows the future and there is nothing left for him but to live it; his life is closed, it is a somber, religious melody whose unfolding he foresees to the final chord. But there are certain events which enable him to live his entire life in an instant: profane duration opens up and discloses the sacred time of repetition and fatality. Of repetition: for the miracles reproduce symbolically the original crisis. Of fatality: if he is caught stealing, if he is arrested, the vague, lazy web of daily life rips apart, revealing the irremediable sequence and quasi-mechanical fatality of sacred time. The interrogations, the sentencing, prison, everything is already there, years are present in a single instant and these years themselves link up with other years, other arrests, other imprisonments and ultimately imprisonment for life.

But Genet also knows joys, a far greater number than one might think: only, they are not ours. From time to time, a whispered word, a suddenly discovered spectacle reminds him that the reverse of these disgusts is eternal glory, that his failures *are also* triumphs: the poetic miracle* is a hierophantic event, like the miracle of horror. But what it manifests is the stately and positive aspect of predestination.

We saw above that Genet relentlessly willed his failures in order to transform them into victories, and we have observed him trying to adopt the viewpoint of others on his own adventures: he becomes his own historiographer; he *relates his life to himself* as it unfolds. "He spun round": he speaks of himself in the third person, he expresses the present in the past, he mentally drafts his own golden legend, he is already beyond his death and it is *another* who lovingly broods over his lamentable disaster in order to discover in it a secret success. As if the expiatory victim who is being led to the

* One of these miracles gave Genet's second work its title: *Miracle of the Rose.*

place of sacrifice were attempting to borrow the dazzled memory of the crowd that will survive him *in order to remember his future death.* This constant effort of transfiguration does not pay: it remains verbal and abstract. But from time to time it is "relieved." External objects substitute for it, reflect to it its inner concept as if it were an objective structure of being, and bear witness at the same time to the human failure and to a victorious beyond.

Tulle, gauze, lace, veils "unkey his vision"; perception, veiled, blurred, clouded, appears as a recollection, invites to reminiscence; Culafroy has a revelation of the poetic world one day when he sees on the village road "a bride wearing a black dress, though wrapped in a veil of white tulle, lovely and sparkling, like a young shepherd beneath the hoarfrost, like a powdered young miller." These powdered objects manifest their present reality through a transparent layer of pastness; panes of glass insert themselves between the world and consciousness, as does the reflective consciousness between things and the reflexive consciousness. The urgency of being grows dim; nature seems to be remembering herself.

Other and even more poetic objects have a structure of pastness in their very being. It was on seeing red velvet chairs and gilt-framed mirrors in a green field that Genet felt one of his strongest poetic emotions. In the spectacle offered by these profoundly human objects that have been abandoned to nature we recognize Rimbaud's drawing room at the bottom of a lake and Mallarmé's play of being and nonbeing, in short an untenable contradiction. And yet Genet tells us, to the contrary, that poetry eliminates contradiction: "For a long time I thought that the poetic work offered conflicts: it cancels them." It does so because it actually presents them *realized.* Existence exhausts itself in *maintaining* a conflict without a solution; the poem, whether it be a written poem or an object-poem, is this same conflict, but at rest, contained in the calmness of being. The contradiction between the chair and the fields, between the drawing room and the lake, reflects to our eyes the ambiguity of the human condition: man is entirely nature and entirely contranature: he transcends the world and the world crushes him. But this ambiguity which we have to live is here presented to us as a thing; we are given it "to look at." To be sure, the presence of chairs in the meadow entails a positive explanation: they are put outside during house cleaning. There is a reason for everything: tradition, the taste of an age, of a class, of a family, human labor, explain the nature of chairs, their style, their color; the historical circumstances of peasant property explain the con-

figuration of the meadow; climate, hydrography, the nature of the soil, economic necessities, explain the nature of the plants with which it is covered. But when all has been explained, when being is cut and dried, when reason has dissipated legend and dream, then the inexplicable manifests itself like a poetic residue; it is a residue that does not exist, for its nonexistence alone enables it to escape from the cycle of objective explanation, and yet it beckons to Genet, it manifests to his eyes the obscure meaning which remains when being has crushed the vanquished of history, that nonexistent victory of the vanquished which unceasingly haunts the victors. The chair is lost in the field; relationships are immediately established between its colors and those of the meadow; the red of the cloth and the green of the grass manifest their affinities. But contradiction blazes up in the heart of these affinities: the color of the cloth, invented by man and also by time, clashes with the crude green of the young shoots; it speaks of another world. The horizon surrounds the chairs and mirrors; they are lost in nature; but the sharp edges of these articles of furniture are in rigorous opposition to the soft natural curves. Moreover, the human and the nonhuman change places, move from tool to nature and from nature to tool: geometry is an invention of man, and yet there is nothing that is more inhuman; the sighs of nature are far closer to our contingency. In this sleight-of-hand no synthesis is possible, no pause. The chair evokes a society, an etiquette, ceremonies; but nature hems it in on all sides and strips it of man. It is a ruin; it is haunted by the absence of a house, of a town. It looks like the vestige of a vanished civilization. Yet, dead though it be, it is still at variance with the soft grass whose waves humbly lick its haunted feet. Man no longer is; human significations are seen in the wrong way by the eyes of cows or monkeys; Nature is victorious. But the failure of the human species, which has disappeared from the face of the earth, is a meaningless triumph. Its absence is legible within the nature that has choked it: a supernatural order shows through the *inexplicable* colors and forms which the plants are attacking and are going to cover. For a moment, the child Genet thought that man was dead; the chairs and mirrors spoke to him in the past tense as he speaks to himself about his own life. It seemed to him that a divine hand had placed them in the field as a friendly gesture to him. Divine hand, absolute transcendence: precisely because he saw his foster mother carry out the pieces of furniture and put them on the grass, he knows that an intervention of the Other is impossible; precisely because reason accounts for everything except the

strange warning which prophesies the death of the human race, the impossible *must* be supposed in order to explain the superdetermination of the event.

What makes our contradictions unbearable is the fact that they *are* not; we cannot rely on them; in order for them to exist we are constantly obliged to make them; and we, we who maintain them in being, are not either: we make ourselves in making them. Nothing *obliges* Genet to live under pressure, in that unendurable state of tension; and yet he lives thus because nothing *prevents* him from doing so either. But when he discovers a poetic object in the world, it suddenly seems to him that things assume the contradictions which he exhausts himself in maintaining. One would think that they come up very gently, from behind, to help him bear his burden. This conflict of failure and victory, of the possible and the impossible, now suddenly appears as a structure of being. Objects proclaim that there is something beyond life; whereupon the outlaw falls into line; he is freed from his crushing responsibility. And, while discovering a hidden meaning in the arrangement of phenomena, he senses a pitiless and brotherly freedom which disposes things like the words of a sentence in order to speak to him about himself. Being reflects to him, with winning kindness, his own secret. For this reason a vulgar song, when it reaches him through the walls of the prison, moves him more than lofty music. The walls become a song, and the song becomes a wall; the song does not emerge from a man's throat: it is an emanation of the stone; the singer died hopeless, and his voice reaches Genet long afterward, like the light of a dead star. But the fact is that the song is a victory: a human life is resorbed into it as the subjectivity of the vanquished is resorbed into his ideal. Wall and song, chair and meadow: optimism without hope, love without tenderness, a stern brotherhood. His failure, perceived in him by another, perceived by him in objects arranged by another, manifests the triumph of the particular over the universal, of the subjective over the objective community, of the eternal over the historical, of value over fact. The object which offers him this ambiguous signification, which indicates to Genet alone the supernatural, remaining for all other eyes within the framework of nature, is an object-poem. The triumphant loser is doubly elect: firstly, because he alone is designated by the object-poem; secondly, because he alone is able to perceive, through nature, the supernatural.

At first sight, these sacred phenomena seem distinguishable from the miracles of horror in that they are *solicited.* "Poetry," says

Genet, "is a vision of the world achieved by a sometimes exhausting effort of the taut, buttressed will; poetry is willful. It is neither an abandonment nor a free and gratuitous entrance through the senses; it must not be confused with sensuality." The poet goes off to conquer the world; he does not receive poetic impressions—he takes them. The brotherly freedom which comforts Genet by its gentle exigencies is that of Genet himself. He hides behind the mirrors, the chairs, the voice that sings; he lives in a haunted universe, the ghost of which is none other than Genet himself; he engages in a dialogue with himself through the intermediary of things.

But do not the miracles of horror flow into the imaginary? Must not Genet make an effort, to a certain extent, to force them? Astounded as he is by the rigorous precision of catastrophes, horror takes away his feeling for reality; the obviousness of the frightful miracles that overwhelm him gives to the course of the world the necessity of a ballet. It is in nightmares that it suffices to fear the worst for the worst to occur immediately. In Genet, the highest pitch of lucidity coincides with the fright of the dream, and the most acute consciousness of misfortune with the quietism of aesthetic contemplation.

### *3. Language*

Language is *nature* when I discover it within myself and outside of myself with its resistances and its laws which escape me: words have affinities and customs which I must *observe,* must *learn;* language is a *tool* as soon as I speak or listen to someone else; and words sometimes display surprising independence, marrying in defiance of all laws and thus producing puns and oracles within language; thus, the word is *miraculous.* With regard to language, which is both his most inward reality and the most rigorous expression of his exile, Genet adopts very early, long before dreaming of writing, a complex attitude which sums up, in a new unity, his attitudes toward Nature, the miracle and the tool.

Our society, which has been in a state of crisis since the First World War, uses a language that is too old for it. Many words, detached from objects, are adrift; many men who are out of their element in the bourgeois class, isolated by their history and their complexes, have a feeling that language does not quite belong to them. Brice Parain, a peasant boy who became a city dweller, a

fighter who returned from the front, a Communist who was excluded from the party, has fallen into a chronic state of amazement in relation to words. Leiris, a bourgeois, son and grandson of bourgeois, feels ill at ease in bourgeois language and his uneasiness gives his writings a stilted quality. Bataille roars with laughter when he contemplates the absurdity of the world, of his body and of the word.

But this strangeness of language is, for all of them, an intermittent phenomenon. Bataille tortures himself "upon occasion"; the rest of the time he is a librarian. Leiris is an ethnographer. Ponge was an insurance agent. Parain works in a publishing house. In order to draw up an insurance policy, to catalogue a library, to communicate precise knowledge about Ethiopian zars or about Dogons one must use language as an exact and plain instrument, in short one must write prose. The fact is that these poets are also members of the bourgeoisie: as valued employees or officials of bourgeois society, their astonishment about language results from a slight and discontinuous maladjustment. The "socialization" of which Leiris spoke in the passage quoted earlier was effected somehow or other. Let us assume, however, that the maladjustment is constant and radical: the moment the child Genet realizes that the word is a "shared thing," that it is "socialized," he becomes aware that this socialization is effected against him; the terms, which belonged only to him, now "open out," but, it so happens, they open out on the language of his foster parents who condemn him and of the villagers who insult him. One can imagine the jolt: all his words are snatched from him! He will remain fixated in this childish amazement.

Genet was condemned to silence: a culprit does not speak. I still remember the indignant astonishment feigned by the adults when, having been punished, at the age of ten, for some misdeed or other, I dared address them. In the case of Genet, the astonishment continues: last year M. Mauriac advised him to remain silent forever. In the old days, they simply cut off a delinquent's tongue; our society, which is more humane, lets him keep his organs of phonation on condition that he not use them. Why should Genet speak? He can only lie or deceive, *since* he is a thief. The truth is that what they fear most is that he may defile words: in like manner, the women of certain tribes must express themselves by gestures; only the men have the right to use speech. If he violates the prohibition, one must neither listen to him nor, above all, answer him: one would be taken in or compromised. What is worse, in agreeing to

carry on a dialogue, one would be maintaining, if only for an instant, a reciprocal relationship with him. When he is caught, the cops will require that he keep his mouth shut until he is questioned; during the questioning, he will have to answer briefly. *To answer:* not allowed to ask questions. As if they were lending him language the better to confound him. If he uses it in order to deny, they beat him: actually, he is not allowed to talk except to confess. In prison, silence. Five years, ten years of silence; if he is sent to a penal colony, he is silenced for life. Obviously they cannot prevent him from speaking soundlessly, in his throat, they cannot prevent him from writing on the walls of his cell, from exchanging signs, behind the guard's back, with the other prisoners: but these furtive, stolen communications confirm him in the feeling that he is stealing language *too.*

Moreover, let him use *words* as much as he likes: Society has put *things* in safekeeping. The vocables which he learns refer to forbidden realities. Those for commodities, realty, gardens designate the property of others: the designated objects remain forever inaccessible to him, turn to others their true faces, in short, are in themselves and on principle other than what they appear to him to be. Technical terms reflect an understanding among honest workers within an occupational group; but he will never share in this understanding, which was reached against him and his kind. The names that apply to the State, to national sovereignty, to the rights and duties of the citizens, concern realities which are thoroughly foreign to him. Political and social problems are second-degree matters in that the integrated citizen decides which influences he will undergo, combat and exercise in the collectivity. Those of Genet will never go beyond the first degree, since his very integration is in question. Our words turn their backs to him, designate absences, denote distances, name invisible things, refer to what is manifest to others and remains hidden from his eyes: they are repositories of unrealizable intuitions. No doubt he understands the "socialized" meaning of the vocables he uses, but this meaning remains abstract. No doubt he can assemble them to make sentences, but he does so like a blind man. *Blind Man's Works:* this is the title that Henri Thomas has given to his volume of poems; it is one that Genet could apply to everything he says. He speaks: this means that words pop up out there in society and assemble and take on all by themselves a meaning that escapes him. Somewhere in human eyes a light starts shining. *Therefore* he has struck home; someone within the collectivity has understood his

statement as it was meant to be understood. But Genet does not know what has been understood: in like manner Aminadab's message has a quite different meaning for those who receive it than for the one who issues it.* Genet says: "Prison awaits me." For him, prison is his lot, his giddiness and his destiny, a threat, a bodily constraint and at the same time a refuge against men, a monastery. But the right-thinking man to whom these words are spoken does not take it in that sense: prison is a social institution, very comparable to the sewers of big cities and intended, like them, for disposing of waste products. The prison belongs to him; he shares the ownership of it with other right-thinking men, and, though he no more cares to think about it than about slaughterhouses, he is not unaware that part of the taxes he pays goes to make up the budget of the penitentiaries. How is one to make oneself understood if one uses haunted words?

Because this child is, for himself, another, language decomposes and alters within him, becomes the language of the others. To speak is to steal words, and the latter retain, even in the depths of his throat, the indelible traits of their true owners: cheated even in his inner monologue, Genet is a robbed thief; he steals language, and in return he is robbed of his thought. In our rapid, condensed, scraggy, hacked soliloquies, words pass unnoticed, they serve as points of reference for our thoughts and gestures; in the case of Genet, the constant displacement which separates them from what they name fixes his attention on them. He listens to himself speaking within himself, he does not have sufficient familiarity with language to dare cut into it, to abbreviate, to take shortcuts; it is not exactly that he composes sentences: substantives march by in his head, pompously, a bit stiff, jerkily, like pictures projected by a magic lantern. These substantives indicate to an imaginary witness the action that the child is performing, without ever being quite able to express it. Little Culafroy turns on himself; there immediately appear in his head the noble and graceful words: "spun round." But the torn, shabby soles of his shoes slacken his pirouette: the words evoke an exemplary reality that Genet does not succeed in imitating in his behavior. Whence the permanence of his astonishment: words, in him, are like foreign bodies; he observes them, examines them, runs them in neutral, just to see. As the designated objects are all equally taboo, myth and reality are equivalent: since they have bereft him of the world, since every-

* The reference here is to *Aminadab* by Maurice Blanchot.—Translator's note.

thing is more remote from and more fabulous to him than faraway Asia, it matters little whether Genet calls his prison a clink or a palace: it is equally impossible for him to live in a palace and to see a prison with the eyes of a judge or a taxpayer. What counts is the word's material presence, which symbolizes the signifying content that, for Genet, is none other than the being of the thing signified. To change words is to change being. His original crisis corresponded exactly to the intuitive crystallization that the word effected for other eyes: the word "thief" was an astringent. Haunted by this crisis, Genet aspires to provoke it, in turn, in other objects: he wants to name, not in order to *designate* but to *transform*. He looks at the walls of his cell, launches the word "palace" and waits: nothing happens, nothing ever happens. But why should this disturb him? In any case, he knows that he is denied the experience of intuitive crystallization: it will not take place if he says *palace;* nor will it if he says *prison*. As for the inner metamorphosis of the thing, since it is inner it will obviously escape him. The important thing is that the word be in his mouth: things—forbidden, remote, flowing—are the appearances of which words are the reality. There is no doubt but that the child makes himself an accomplice and a victim of a new mystification: the starving person is refused meat and bread but is given, instead, the word "steak"; let him amuse himself with it as much as he likes. In point of fact, if he merely repeats it in a low voice this act will certainly be followed by movements of his jaws, an abundant flow of saliva, contractions of the stomach accompanied by an emission of gastric juices, in short digestion on no load. Now, it is precisely this empty digestion and enjoyment, this exhausting delight of absence and nothingness, that Genet will later decide to prefer to all else.

But he now "makes himself" a thief: immediately the fissure spreads, multiplies in all directions. Language cracks from below; the virus attacks other verbal strata. That was to be expected: the decision to take upon himself what is imposed upon him and to launch out voluntarily on the only path that lies open to him can only hasten the course of his inner disturbances. It is he who becomes the agent of the disintegration of language: that is, without yet giving a name to his undertaking, without making it the object of a special act of will, he changes into a poet because he wills himself a thief. Since his adolescence he has had no "normal" relationship—that is, no prose relationship—with language. Two phases are to be distinguished: in the first, which goes as far as the solipsistic endeavor, the disturbances are not willed for their own

sake; they are the consequence of the decision to steal. But in the second, that is, as soon as Genet undertakes to become his own companion, he takes the initiative and deliberately sinks into verbal disease.

Let us begin with the first phase. Genet the thief decides to lie. I do not quite know what he stole or how he went about things, but no matter. We can take the liberty of choosing as an example one of the thefts he committed when he was about thirty: the relationship to language does not change. Well then, he enters a bookshop with a rigged briefcase and pretends that he wants to buy a rare book. While the bookseller goes to get the volume, Genet notices another on a table or a shelf and rapidly slips it into his briefcase. When he addressed the bookseller, it was for the purpose of informing him of an intention which did not exist: he was not concerned with *buying* and probably did not have enough money on him to pay for anything; he wished only to get a troublesome witness out of the way. Yet he *communicated* with the other person. But it was a pseudo-communication which destroyed all possibilities of real communication. In short, like the surrealists who painted with the aim of destroying painting, but more effectively than they, he uses language to destroy language. The bookseller actually thinks that he is performing once again the act which he constantly repeats in the course of the day; it seems to him that his movements express his sustained will to do his job and to serve the interests of his employer. But the fact is that he is not acting, he is dancing: he goes to get *for nothing* a book that nobody wants to buy; his eagerness, his smile, which ordinarily aim at charming customers, are mere pantomime since there are no customers in the shop but only a thief who cannot be charmed. And the result of this pantomime is a denial of the real world to the advantage of a universe of pure appearance. He thinks he is going to the back of the shop to get a valuable article: he is actually going off to leave Genet a clear field. He has become a fake bookseller, a true accomplice of a thief. He thinks he has understood Genet's request, and, in point of fact, his senses have transmitted to him correct indications which his mind has correctly interpreted. Nevertheless, to understand was, in this case, not to understand, for thorough understanding would have implied that he had discerned the intention to deceive in the physiognomy or intonation of his fake client. The statement made him deaf, blind, ignorant: in short, it made of him a thing that one pushes out of the way. Let us note in passing the resemblance of the universe of theft to that of homosexuality: in both cases, inner

reality becomes pure appearance without efficacy, and it is appearance, on the other hand, that becomes reality. In this fake world, language is used in the wrong way: although its function is to unite, to reveal and to harmonize, it separates, conceals and estranges; although it is a body of signs which are meant to be offered to the intelligence of persons, it makes one of the speakers an unconscious instrument of the other.

Genet is aware that he is lying and knows that the object which is signified does not exist. He wants his statement, which for him is void of meaning, to offer the other an illusory plenitude. Signification exists *only for the other:* for the other, it transcends the words and aims at a certain object located in the back of the shop. Genet utters a sentence which he knows has meaning only for others. *For him* it is only a magical formula, the effect of which is to cast a spell on those who hear it and to make them do what they do not want to do by leading them to believe that they are doing what they want to do. In a sense, it is a cabalistic formula that is recited mechanically. And yet it is haunted by a signification that denies itself since Genet knows that the other understands it. The bookseller, who guides himself by means of the words, perceives Genet intuitively as a purchaser: proper clothing, relaxed attitude, these things tally with the statement and serve as a visible content. Thus, for Genet himself an intuitive meaning is present in the proposition, but *as another and for the other;* this meaning escapes him on principle, for he can no doubt know it in the abstract and by its effects on the person he addresses (he sees that the other smiles, walks away, etc.), but cannot enjoy it. From this point of view, it is a duplication of the original situation: the signification of the word "purchaser" is not given to Genet intuitively any more than was the word "thief." Here, however, the deformation is more serious, for this intuitive meaning is false while it is being lived by the other. The other just about manages, by his behavior, to impart to it an appearance of reality. There is thus, at the core of words, a concrete plenitude which refuses to give itself to Genet because it is lived by the other, and which is annihilated in the other, for it is only an illusion. When one tells a lie, language is isolated, stands out, imbibes its significations and constitutes an order apart: the order of the trap and the sham. But was it not actually that even before Genet dreamed of lying? Did not significations flee the child who wanted to grasp them? Was not speech already a breaking off of communication? Here as elsewhere Genet has merely adopted the given: cast out of language and out of the social world of tools, he uses instru-

ments and words *in reverse;* the separative power of the Word became a power to lie when he decided to accept it and turn it to advantage.

When he pretended that he wanted to buy a book, he was affirming the existence of a nonexistent object. Here is the reverse situation: he leaves the shop, an inspector who knows him challenges him: "What have you got in your briefcase?" "Nothing." In this case, the negation becomes a pure, abstract refusal that plays on the surface of being; it is objective, but dwells solely in the universe of words; it is only the materiality of the sound that sustains it in its nothingness. And if the detective does not believe it, if nevertheless Genet maintains it in despair, then it no longer exists for anyone, it persists in the teeth of the glaring truth, of the tacit agreement between cops and thieves: language functions idly and in the void:

" 'You're the one who did the job on the Rue de Flandres.'
" 'No, it wasn't me.'
" 'It was you. The concierge recognized you.'
" 'It's someone who looks like me.'
" 'She says his name is Guy.'
" 'It's someone who looks like me and has the same name.'
" 'She recognizes your clothes.'
" 'He looks like me, has the same name and the same clothes.'
" 'He's got the same hair.'
" 'He looks like me, has the same name, the same clothes and the same hair.'
" 'They found your fingerprints.'
" 'He looks like me, has the same name, the same clothes, the same hair and the same fingerprints.'
" 'That can keep on.'
" 'To the very end.'
" 'It was you who did the job.'
" 'No, it wasn't me.' "*

That is what is called "denying the evidence." But evidence cannot be denied. In order for this taut, abstract will to nothingness to be maintained in its absurdity, in its contradictions, it must be based on being: otherwise it would be corroded by the void. Language imparts to it its materiality. And as it is always possible to unite words when thoughts repel each other, it is pure language

* *The Thief's Journal.*

that sustains Genet in his will to the impossible. These words which clash, which burn each other, become for him a kind of index of the strictly impracticable operations to which he has dedicated his life. Thanks to language, Genet can impart a being to nothingness and remain resolutely in the domain of shadows, that is, of Evil. Thanks to language, Genet can realize his ambitious design of being wrong.

However, Genet does not steal all the time: he comes and goes, he talks. Given hospitality by middle-class people, he serves them, he exchanges comments with them. And, what is even better, he buys and sells, exactly as do consumers and merchants. Is there not, in these moments of respite, a normal use of speech, is there not prose and communication? Must not language lower itself to the rank of instruments, must not words efface themselves in the presence of the operations they govern or the objects they designate? No doubt. But let us not forget that Genet thinks he is a monster and that awareness of his abjection never leaves him. Amidst the honest folk who speak to him without knowing his true nature, he feels hounded: he can be unmasked at any moment. "He feared lest some gleam from the interior of his body or from his own consciousness illuminate him . . . and make him visible to men who would have forced him to the hunt." Like certain American Negroes who, by virtue of having an almost white skin, have "crossed the color line" and live among the whites at the cost of constant tension and in such a state of anxiety that many of them finally return to their black brothers, he constantly plays a role, and he must avoid, above all, being unmasked. Everything is faked, he is double and even triple: there is, firstly, the one he is for himself, "that incomparable monster, preferable to everything,"* and then there is the thief that he is for certain people and that he must hide, and finally the honest chap he pretends to be. The true and the false mingle: no doubt at times he buys clothing, food. But he does so with stolen money and because it would be too dangerous to take them without paying. Everything is make-believe: only language is true. If he says to the salesman, this time: "I'd like to buy a pair of shoes," he is not lying. Only, it is not Genet who is speaking: it is the actor playing the honest man. He coldly listens to himself reciting his role of honest man as the actor in Diderot's *Paradox* calmly listens to Hamlet or Britannicus thundering through his mouth. Language again eludes him. At times he is a

* Malraux, *Man's Fate.*

real thief lying and at others a fake bourgeois speaking the truth, but speech always remains foreign to him: he borrows it or steals it. The Word is the Other.

It may, however, be pointed out that there exists a community which has forged a language of its own against the bourgeois tongue, to wit, the community of tramps and gangsters to which Genet belongs. With them, at least, communication is possible. In the reformatory, in prison, in the Court of Miracles, Genet can talk in prose: he has only to use argot.

But, to begin with, argot itself is a poetic language. And I am not, of course, asserting that its terms are noble or charming; I mean that this fabricated language represents the attempt of a parasitic society, which feels itself cut off from reality, to make good a huge verbal deficit by means of lyricism and by inventing words. Thieves and criminals are all more or less in the same situation as Genet: they have to use common words and these words are forbidden them. They must, of course, have a noun to designate a door or a train. But if they use the words "door" and "train," they are communicating among themselves by means of the language of the enemy; they are installing within themselves the words of the bourgeois, hence his thoughts, values and *Weltanschauung;* they are almost at the point of judging their crimes by his principles; a spy, a witness, a court of law are established in their hearts. Thus, their crimes and their will to form a unity of Evil create an immense gap in their verbal universe. For them the social act par excellence will be the invention of new conventions. They can, of course, distort customary words in accordance with certain rules, as in pig Latin. But this is still to concede too much to honest people: it is tantamount to admitting that the basic language remains the *white* language of the society of the just. Fake languages can serve them on occasion, when they want to talk without being understood by others. But they want *words of their own* in order to *remain among themselves,* in order to designate objects without resorting to the mediation of the society that hounds them. And as they have neither the leisure nor the means to invent a language, and as, in addition, the objects which they have to designate are not new realities which, in the manner of industrial inventions or scientific discoveries, require new denominations, they will be unable to avoid using the words of the dictionary. It is then that they hit upon what will become one of the fundamental procedures of argot. In order to name an object, they choose the terms of the common language which apply to lateral, secondary or implicit

properties of the object in question: most often these will be adjectives (*le dur* [the tough], *la lourde* [the door], *le grimpant* [the trousers]*) which they will transform into substantives.

In a certain sense, argot resembles the substitute language which is painfully reinvented by persons suffering from aphasia. For the aphasic, as for thieves, the *situation* is characterized by a heavy deficit, and he *reacts* by resorting to paraphrases. Argot is the aphasic language of gangsters. The word of the common language designates the object by its essence: "infant," for example, goes straight to the essential characteristic of a child, to wit, that it does not speak. If man is defined as a reasonable or a political animal, it is a fact of prime importance that he is unable, at the beginning, to use reason, because he does not possess speech, or to communicate with his fellow men. And even if its etymology has been lost, at least the word corresponds to the entire thing and consequently caps the hierarchized ensemble of its properties. In rejecting the proper word, argot is thus compelled to use improprieties; it is a deviating language. In order not to give the name *infans* to the newborn child, it is reduced to calling it a *crapper,* that is, to referring to it by its intestinal incontinence; the slang word will be understood only with reference to the common language, that is, to a whole labor of definition, grouping, classification and convention which allows the normal play of thought. The object of the slang word is not the naked thing but the thing with its name. A crapper is not simply a human offspring: it is *a human being already called an infant.* It is with things that have already been thought, classified and named in a forbidden and sacred language that argot establishes its relations, just as those who speak it have contact only with matter that has already been worked upon. It feeds on the common language as tramps feed on the work of others. And the slang expression is poetic because it always refers to an absent reality (the essence named by the proper word) about which there is an unspoken agreement between interlocutors. We find in an unexpected area the allusive words of Mallarmé. Argot is a half-mute, half-prolix language which replaces the straight line by oblique paths and through which the real—fleeting, imperfectly known, always veiled by a coarseness that resembles modesty—can be surmised. Comparisons in argot are materialistic, but as they pride themselves on not saying everything the true definition haunts them like a soul that is careful not to let itself be seen. *Repousser du*

* *Dur* = hard, *lourde* = heavy, *grimpant* = *climbing.*—Translator's note.

*goulot, tuer la mouche, cocoter, cogner,** ignoble expressions for *not saying* "to stink." But the dropping of all explanation makes them poetic: a man goes by, children flee, flies drop dead at his feet, there we have the picture. The only thing absent is the *odor.* It thereby gains a kind of refinement, of spirituality, it vanishes; yet it is there, all-powerful, despite its "vibratory disappearance." The consequences are given without the premises, the part is taken for the whole, the whole is given by the part, the appearance is substituted for the reality; thus, everything contributes to making argot a restless, seeking soul that vainly sets traps to capture an elusive reality. To talk argot is to choose Evil, that is, to know being and truth but to reject them in favor of a nontruth which offers itself for what it is; it is to choose the relative, parasitism, failure. For that very reason argot is, in spite of itself, a poetic language.

Those who commonly use argot are probably not sensitive to this poetry. Perhaps the need to communicate reduces it for them to being only a kind of minor prose. But, as it happens, Genet *does not have the right* to use it for purposes of communication. As a passive homosexual, he is required to understand it but is forbidden to speak it: the language of the toughs, of the pimps, of the big shots is not meant for a girl queen:

"The queens had their language apart. Argot was for men. It was the male tongue. Like the men's language among the Caribbees, it became a secondary sex attribute . . . everyone could understand it, but the only ones who could speak it were the men, who, at birth, received as a gift the gestures, the carriage of the hips, legs and arms, the eyes, the chest, with which one could speak it. One day, at one of our bars, when Mimosa ventured the following words in the course of a sentence: '. . . his screwy stories . . .' the men frowned. Someone said, with a threat in his voice, 'Broad acting tough.' "

Excluded from the society of the just and then from the society of the tough, Genet finds himself, with respect to the language of the latter, in the strictly contemplative attitude which he was forced to adopt toward the language of the former. And precisely because he can *understand* the language but is forbidden to use it as an instrument of communication, words lose for him their instrumental value: they thereby become all the more *present.* When one

* Literally: *repousser du goulot,* to push away with the spout or the mouth, the proper meaning of *goulot* being the former and the slang meaning the latter; *tuer la mouche,* to kill the fly; *cocoter* (of a hen), to cackle, when laying an egg; *cogner,* to whack.—Translator's note.

speaks, one picks up vocables anywhere, very quickly, and tosses them to the other person; one does not even notice the tool one is using; in short, one does not hear oneself. But if any permanent prohibition confines us to the role of passive listener, the speakers seem to be conducting a service; language is isolated, in the manner of the Latin of the Mass; it is the object of an aesthetic intuition: the play of these sonant volutes seems to obey a finality without end. *Visible* language has become a thing: "It was like the colored plumage of male birds, like the multicolored silk garments which are the prerogatives of the warriors of the tribe." Absorbed in understanding in order to reply, we rarely perceive the *voice,* we go directly to the meaning. Genet, who is kept in the background, does not distinguish the sacred words of the forbidden language from the rough and quiet voices which utter them. The male voice, which is a column of air, an upright penis, and the vocable, which is the sign of the virile member, are one and the same. For the girl queen, the primary function of argot, which is language in erection, is not signification; argot overwhelms and subjugates; it recalls the horrible and delightful servitude of lovemaking: "Argot in the mouths of their men disturbed the queens, though they were less disturbed by the invented words peculiar to that language than by expressions from the ordinary world that were violated by the pimps, adapted by them to their mysterious needs, perverted, deformed and tossed into the gutter and their beds."

Of course, we are sometimes delighted by a woman's voice, we are thrilled by its timbre or rhythm. But, in general, the quality of this voice remains unrelated to the meanings expressed.* That soft and low contralto voice wastes its rich sonority in saying to us: "How are you?" or "That's exactly what my husband thinks."

Genet, however, reveals an inner connection between argot, which is a language of men, and the male vocal organs that use it: each of these organs, by its timbre, its haughty slowness, its ruggedness, establishes and fortifies its privilege. The word is not carried by the voice as is a tool by a hand: it is the embodiment of the voice, the concrete, individual figure in which the voice has chosen to manifest itself. But the symbolic correspondence is even more complex: the mere presence of the Pimp is experienced by Genet as a rape; his sacred and powerful voice is a rape for the ear. We have seen that the rape is the original structure of Genet's sexuality. Now, argot is, in its words and syntax and by virtue of its whole

* Unless—and such a case is more complex and far more rare—the woman has created for herself a language that corresponds to her voice.

semantic content, the permanent practice of rape. We showed above how argot, by its refusal or inability to use the proper word, condemned itself to impropriety. This condemnation has a reverse side: argot is a physical constraint; it forces words which have a definite use to designate, despite themselves, objects that do not suit them. Thus, the sacred ceremony of speech, of which Genet makes himself the simple witness, represents in his eyes the permanent and overwhelming drama of his sexuality. Muscles, voice, use of words, everything is fused into an indissoluble unity. In addition, argot, which is a symbolic rape, does not simply excite Genet physically; it also satisfies his resentment. For the victim of its acts of violence is the language of the just, the language which Genet is denied. It is a revenge, quite like the capital punishment of criminals. Parasitic and destructive, argot is the very image of the Evil which borrows the Being of Good only to corrode it with its acids. This language, which designates the world only by its appearances, is an appearance in itself, and those who speak it are the great gruesome appearances of crime. It is all this that Genet will first perceive through his excitement and evil joy: a column of air rises and becomes a word; the word is a sacred drama, the affirmation of virility in Evil; it attacks the thing in a roundabout way and casts a spell on it instead of expressing it; in the end, raped and triumphant, there remains, like an overtone, the proper name, the unformulated foundation of the whole system. Argot is, for the girl queen, language in reverse. The just man sees in the words the souls of things. For Genet, argotic words are things which have a soul: it is through the voice, which is verbal flesh, and then through the sacred drama that he will grasp, very far off, in silhouette, their meaning.

And this meaning itself is not fixed and simple like that of ordinary words—"bread," "chair," "hammer"—which relates to a single object: it opens out on the infinite. Indeed, let us not forget that Genet, excluded from the society of crime, is an objective traitor. He will not limit himself to repeating in solitude the words of the slang tongue—such repetition is tantamount not to speaking but merely to playing at being a tough, to assuming, in the realm of the imaginary, the sacred personality of the initiate—he will betray argot; he will amuse himself by giving a bourgeois meaning to expressions which he has not the right to utter. The Pimp rapes the proper word, and Genet will challenge this act, in thought, by raping the slang term in turn.

"Just a while ago, in my cell, the two pimps said, 'We're making

the pages.' They meant they were going to make the bed, but a kind of luminous idea transformed me there, with my legs spread apart, into a husky guard or a palace groom who 'makes' a palace page just as a young man 'makes a chick.' "

The procedure consisted in inverting the use of argot. The pimps took the verb "to make" in a familiar but common sense: all housewives, on all levels of society, speak of "making the beds." However, when the expression "page" is employed to designate a bed, it is specifically argotic. Genet performs the contrary operation: he takes the word "page" in the noble sense of "young aristocrat living in a king's palace" and the word "make" in the erotic and vulgar sense. He no doubt replied to the two hoodlums: "Yes, let's make the pages." And thereby the traitor gave, as it were, a real, an adapted reply; he achieved communication. But he did so in order the better to mislead, since, at the same time, he escaped into a strictly personal universe of imaginary meanings. Blanchot describes Mallarmé's poetic activity in the same way:

"This single word is only the beginning of the shift since, by means of the signification, it again renders present the object signified, the material reality of which it has set aside. It is therefore necessary, if the absence is to continue, that the word be replaced by another word which removes it further and the latter by another which flees it and this last by the very movement of the flight. It is thus that we gain entrance into the realm of images, and not into stable and solid images but into an order where every figure is a passage, a disquiet, a transition, an illusion, an act that has an infinite trajectory. . . ." But Mallarmé uses only one language, the lawful language, and Blanchot characterizes here the relations that the words of this language maintain among themselves. We shall find similar shifts in Genet the writer. But he has not yet begun to write; he is the young beggar who betrays pimps in secret, and as he has at his disposal, *for a single word,* significations borrowed from a double system of reference (the lawful language and the unlawful language) , it is within the same vocable that he plays this game of challenging. For Genet does not see the image of the guard pawing the pages, not even with the mind's eye. The image is, at the outermost point of the words "page" and "make," the indication of an absence, of a flight; it is an internal hemorrhage of the signification.

There remains, however, as might be pointed out, a group to which Genet rightfully belongs: that of the "soft," of the girl queens. Can he not use their language, can he not use prose; in

short, can he not communicate? But the fact is that this group is only a conglomerate; it has none of the characteristics of a veritable society. Although each of its members wills himself a woman, he nevertheless detests the image of his femininity in all the others. Each of the girl queens is the others' "bad smell." Divine and Mimosa, each twining about a big Pimp, hate each other; they can only try to hurt or lie to each other. They are rivals, reflections of each other, never friends; they cannot *recognize* each other. Simone de Beauvoir has shown that there is no feminine society.

Nevertheless, it is true that they have developed a language to designate themselves to each other and to speak about their life. But it is a *fake* language, it fails to name accurately the objects for which it is intended. The girl queens are of the male sex, but in their tastes they are women, and they cannot speak of themselves entirely in the masculine nor entirely in the feminine. And if, despite everything, they choose the feminine, this verbal violence accelerates the disintegration of language within them:

"Though she felt as a 'woman,' [Divine] thought as a 'man.' . . . In order to think with precision it was necessary that Divine never formulate her thoughts aloud, for herself. Doubtless there had been times when she had said to herself aloud, 'I'm just a foolish girl,' but having felt this, she felt it no longer, and, in saying it, she no longer thought it. In Mimosa's presence, for example, she managed to think 'woman' with regard to serious but never essential things. Her femininity was not *only* a masquerade. But as for thinking 'woman' completely, her organs hindered her. To think is to perform an act. In order to act, you have to discard frivolity and set your idea on a solid basis. So she was aided by the idea of solidity, which she associated with the idea of virility, and it was in grammar that she found it near at hand. For if, to define a state of mind that she felt, Divine dared use the feminine, she was unable to do so in defining an action which she performed. And all the 'woman' judgments she made were, in reality, poetical conclusions. Hence, only then was Divine true."

In speaking of herself in the feminine, Divine makes herself understood by the other girl queens, but the agreement is made with respect to a signification that challenges the visible reality. It is "poetically" true that Divine is a woman, but it is not plainly and simply true. She herself does not wish to become a woman completely since she loathes women. She wants to be a man-woman: a woman when she is passive, a man when she acts. Thus, this language relates here to an absence; Genet's femininity is an evanes-

cent being, the pure challenging of virility. Gestures, modulations of the voice, idiosyncrasies of language indicate and mime it in its absence. Speaking about herself, Divine *dares* use the feminine, that is, in stilted fashion she makes a sustained but vain effort to achieve the impossible, to attain a being that is barely outlined and that sums up in itself everything that she is not. It is beyond being that she is a woman, in the nothingness which, for poets alone, transcends being in dignity. She is a woman in her failure to be one. She therefore never succeeds in actualizing from within the mystery of her femininity. As soon as the word "she" or the expression "poor woman" is uttered, its being escapes her; it lies outside of her, in the word: similarly, all the pus which infects Genet lies outside of him in the name "thief," and this impossibility of being a woman is only one of the aspects of the radical impossibility of being the Other. Thus, to speak of oneself in the feminine is to trust to words, to leave to them the job of indicating a universe of essences beyond one's grasp.

No doubt the other girl queens understand Divine, but this understanding is likewise poetic. Only a queen can listen without laughing to Divine referring to herself in the feminine; she can do so only because she herself makes a similar effort. Thus, there is communication, but only by virtue of poetic nothingness and not by the designation of being; the girl queens are all accomplices in a huge hoax which must be kept going. If, however, Divine takes it into her head to refer to herself in the masculine, the queens listlessly or spitefully refuse communication: for them, Divine is *playing* the man. And, as a matter of fact, these queens have the misfortune of being obliged to play everything that they are: it is quite true that their femininity is only a game, but it is also true that they cannot be males, except in play. Since for them the man is the tough who subdues them, Divine will never be other than a "broad acting tough."* Her physical organism does not allow her to be a woman, and the social prohibition that weighs on her does not allow her to be a man. Caught between these two impossibilities, Divine, that is, Genet, will once again demand the worst. Instead of challenging the social taboo that exiles him from masculinity, he prefers to assume it: it is always *social* misfortune that he insists on; it is always against the Other and the Other's inten-

* A similar necessity is found in the case of the music-hall actor who disguises himself as a woman: "In order to become the man again it is not sufficient to run the film backward. It is also necessary that the truth be translated and that it have a relief which can be maintained along the same lines as the lie. That is why Barbette, as soon as his wig is torn off, performs a man's role. . . ." Jean Cocteau, *Le Numéro Barbette.*

tions that he has chosen to fight in becoming willfully and defiantly what the Other obliges him to be. Since he is denied the right to be a man, he will become a woman. But the metamorphosis is impossible: neither his body nor his sex can change; thus, he cannot become feminine *for himself,* inwardly. But it is not for himself that he wishes to effect this resentful metamorphosis: it is against the Other and in the presence of the Other. Thus, his gestures and language aim at obliging the society of men to see him only as a "broad." She utters *in public* such remarks as "I'm the Quite Mad" ("*Je suis la Toute Folle*") because she will thus become *the* (*la*) giddy one, capricious one, divine one for others.* But as soon as she is alone, the remark becomes pointless, for there is no witness to hear it: Divine cannot name herself to *herself* in the feminine. Thus, words flee her, their meaning will be lost in other ears and will never return to her to enlighten her. Her woman's personality and the extraordinary language that expresses it exist only for the other and in the other; Divine eludes herself. At the cost of constant strain she manages to feel herself grazed by the "broad" that she is for the pimp: that is all. And yet it is sufficient that she use the words which designate this imaginary personality for the whole verbal universe to be infected.

"I shall speak to you about Divine, mixing masculine and feminine as my mood dictates, and if, in the course of the tale, I shall have to refer to a woman, I shall manage, I shall find an expedient, a good device, so that there may be no confusion."

A "good device," that means another word or a substitute expression. It is a matter of filling in a crack or at least hiding it. The word "woman" designates *in prose* a biologically and socially defined individual: Genet wrests it by force from its natural object and obliges it to connote a class of individuals who possess *poetically* certain feminine qualities. Deprived of the word that names it, the reality remains naked, crude. If, however, it has to be referred to, he will find a poetic dodge, exactly as does the aphasic or the gangster who speaks argot. Poetry cannot be circumscribed: if you introduce it somewhere into speech, all speech becomes poetic. Genet is not yet a poet, but he is no longer able to express himself in prose. He knows three languages: the common language, argot, the dialect of the queens; and he cannot speak any of them. What is worse, each of them interferes with the other two, challenges them and finally destroys them. Whenever he speaks, he steals words, he

* The author's point is not clear in translation. He is stressing the fact that Divine uses "*la,*" the feminine form of the definite article, rather than "*le,*" the masculine.—Translator's note.

violates them. He is a real thief and the signification of the statements he utters is imaginary, he lies; he is a fake bourgeois, a fake tough, a fake woman, he plays roles; the words are perhaps true, but the speaker is imaginary. The willed and actual absence of all reciprocity murders language; the words telescope, interfere, they burn and corrode each other; as a result of the injury they do each other, their meaning flees and is lost in the infinite. Genet literally does not *know* what he says.

But is it not quite simply because he applies to language the treatment he reserved for utensils? To both the common language and argot he reacts as, in the passage quoted earlier, he reacted to the bus, the toothbrush, the glass. Since words are taboo as tools, he takes refuge, when confronted with them, in quietism. He continues to know what they mean, but he no longer understands the utility of speech. He said earlier: "I reached the point of wondering whether it was true that one drank from a glass." He is now astounded that one can give the name *glass* to that fragile, transparent thing resting on the table. The "luxurious detachment" which reveals to him "the elegance and oddness" of a clothespin can disclose to him, in like manner, the strange beauty of a vocable. These words hover between the material realm of sounds and the spiritual realm of meanings, as do tools between the realm of man and that of nature: they are declassed. Voluminous and fascinating, they begin to exist all by themselves, outside of the denominative act; they become gestures, appearances.

Genet cannot persist in holding aloof from language. He returns to speech, but with the aim of destroying it or perverting its meaning. At times his discourse is a lie, that is, the equivalent of a burglary, and at times it is a subtle inversion of speech: commonplace words give him, by their appearing, an opportunity to create, quite deliberately, *misconceptions,* as the nun's gown and headdress gave Culafroy the idea of disguising himself as a Sister: through the universal he expresses, to himself and for himself alone, his particularity; he uses the crude but common expression "to make the pages" to reveal aloud to everyone, without anyone's being able to understand, the shameful secret of his homosexuality.

The effect of this particular attention to language and of this illicit use of speech is to multiply the miracles. Often, in that long daily discourse which is spoken everywhere at the same time by all mouths, in that "prose of the world," he reveals strange encounters similar to those of a lake and a drawing room, of an armchair and a meadow.

When speaking, Genet *keeps an eye on himself.* He is the object of a double verdict: the Just have said to him: "You're a thief," the thieves: "You're a fairy." He has to be careful: what if he betrayed himself in speaking? As a thief, he has to go masked: the police are on the lookout for him. As a fairy, he runs the risk of being laughed at, despite himself: like all childish and secret societies, the society of gangsters is very fastidious about language, very quick to discover unspoken allusions in it. Genet is quite willing to speak like a girl, but he wants it to be known that he does so on purpose. He plays the simpleton: he makes a spectacle of himself in order to avoid playing the fool. Words can have secret meanings; a sentence which is uttered seriously can unloose gales of laughter and, without his realizing it, set the laughers against him. There is only one way of avoiding these pitfalls: to review rapidly, before the others do, all possible meanings, if necessary to shatter words, to link up the syllables among themselves in all kinds of ways, as do schoolboys who try to discover pornographic verses in *Polyeucte,* in short, to adopt toward language the attitude of the paranoiac toward the world, to seek in it all symbols, all signs, all allusions, all plays on words, so as to be able, if need be, to take them over and pass them off as the effect of his will. So there he is, talking and listening to himself at the same time: he wants to disclose the diabolical element in his own words. It is as if words, though seeming to obey his intentions, assemble in accordance with an objective finality that escapes him, as if, through his mouth, Another were speaking to Another. All the decompositions and recompositions to which he subjects his speech end by giving rise within him to the kind of illumination which suddenly transfigures the word "page." Imaginary illuminations, to be sure, since this remark is addressed to nobody and since nobody uttered it in that sense. But illuminations, all the same: for the words are there and it is quite true that they have a double signification. In order for their latent meaning to be realized, it would suffice that Another perceive it, with the result that, over and above the clear and intentional meaning which he confers upon the statement, Genet fears and requires a listener who would discover its secret face; over and above the impossible communication with human beings of flesh and blood, he postulates a poetic communication with an imaginary witness. Whether or not he gives this witness a face and name, whether or not he addresses him over the heads of the real persons to whom he is speaking, he will assume his verbal situation and will become a poet.

Now, this ideal interlocutor exists: it is Genet himself, Genet as

Other. We left him, a while ago, "swallowing" the divinity, establishing it within himself, identifying it with an intelligible and untemporal choice of Evil. He has made of sacred Genet the witness of profane Genet and, whatever the workings of his mind, he now knows that a gaze is contemplating them. Better still, he knows that this witness is considering, in kindly fashion, all the misfortunes with which his way has been strewn and, far from regarding them as the sordid effects of his punishment, that he is able to recognize them as tests, as stages of a magnificent series of stations of the Cross. Henceforth, each of Genet's thoughts, each moment of his inner monologue, is defined by two frames of reference: on the one hand, the simple daily and empirical manifestation of his presence to himself, the absolute inwardness of consciousness; and, on the other, a perpetual language, an endless discourse addressed to the other. But he does not speak to this Divinity at the back of his mind as he would to a flesh-and-blood person standing in front of him. We must indeed assume that he understands everything that the latter wishes to say and only what he says. But just as the Divinity discerns the secret face of the world and sees a test in what appears to men the sequence of causes and effects, it will, in like manner, hear the hidden spirit of language; what is *meaningless* in the expression—play on words, involuntary nonsense—is precisely what will be meaningful to the Divinity, and it is the intentional meaning that will be meaningless. When Genet addresses the Divinity, he places his trust in words; he knows that they have an absolute meaning which escapes him, and it is this mysterious meaning which he offers up as a sacrifice. And since he knows that in the eyes of the Divinity the accidents of his wretched life are the splendid signs of his election, he will name them for it in terms of splendor. Not that he himself perceives in them the magnificence with which he adorns them: he counts on the Divinity to find it there; unlike what happens in ordinary discourse, his words designate not so much what he sees as what he cannot see. By means of language one shows to the interlocutor what he is unaware of; Genet uses it to show the Divinity what it alone knows and what he cannot see. When he makes of his prison a palace, of a pimp a great lord and of himself a prince, the sumptuous words which he utters float above the sordid realities without shedding light on them or merging with them: nothing happens, just as nothing happened in the past when he uttered the word "thief" as he looked at himself in the mirror. But he counts on his supreme witness to effect the intuitive fusion of meaning and thing. He enjoins it to have the

intuition in his place. We have already noted that he opposes other dizzying words to *the* "dizzying word," just as he opposes a sovereign judge to the society that has condemned him. When he kept repeating, uncomprehendingly, the name "thief," the meaning eluded him, flowed out of the word and into the minds that *saw him* as a thief and were bent on destroying him. Thus, he used a word which made it possible for the others to attain an intuition which for him was unattainable. Now he has understood: he picks up the leaking words, he utters them and feels the silky discharge of their meaning. But this discharge takes place in the opposite direction: not in front of him and toward others, but behind him and toward the Other who contemplates him. Furthermore, it is not a matter of Genet's informing the inner Divinity: he points out to it what it already sees; he teaches it nothing. The denominative operation here resembles the *montre,* a very old feudal ceremony, one which had fallen into disuse long before the end of the Middle Ages: after the homage, the vassal invited his lord to the estate with which the latter had invested him and, leading him to some high spot, showed [*montrait*] it to him. This gesture taught nothing to the donor, who was thoroughly familiar with the estate: it was rather a thanksgiving, a *recognition* on the part of the beneficiary. Similarly with Genet: the words which he utters in secret are not designation words but homage words. He began by whistling melodies which he dedicated to his divinity; he now sings even when he speaks to it: "The words which I use, even if they are meant to explain, will sing." He tells us: "I had gone across Europe by my own means, which are the opposite of glorious means. Yet I was writing for myself a secret history, in details as precious as the histories of the great conquerors." But he quite realizes that he is neither *relating* his story to himself nor *explaining* it: he marks it out "with glamorous words, *charged, I mean, in my mind, with more glamour than meaning.*"

It remains to be seen how one finds these beautiful painted shells which one dedicates to the divinity: by what does one recognize a glamorous word? Answer: by the poetic emotion it arouses. And what is poetic emotion? Nothing other than the exorcising repetitions of the original crisis. One day, when he was caught pilfering, the word "thief" struck him like lightning, and the earth opened beneath his feet: he felt himself escaping and becoming a thief elsewhere, in the minds of others; a social and inaccessible order of language manifested itself. The poetic emotion surges up when he hears certain words uttered unexpectedly, and this too is a dizzi-

ness. In the corridors of the prison Genet hears the word "yarded" [*envergué*] mentioned.

"The magnificence of such an achievement—impalement by a yard [*vergue*]—made me tremble from head to foot."* The same voice then utters some comic and obscene words. "[This expression] destroyed the charm of the other one, and I regained my footing on the solid basis of joking, whereas poetry always pulls the ground away from under your feet and sucks you into the bosom of a wonderful night."

Fall, void, night of unknowing: it is not a matter of an Apollonian poetry sparkling with brilliant, visible images. It is the vertigo, the want, the nothingness, and the negation which mark the poetic emotion. A word strikes him, the ground opens up: the poem is born (there exist, for Genet, poems composed of a single word). What has happened? The term or the phrase that suddenly loomed up bore witness to the existence of God, that is, of sacred Genet. It suddenly allowed a glimpse of something unrealizable over and above its prose signification, something which, beyond the place and the moment, above Genet's head, required a supreme consciousness that alone was capable, intuitively, of bringing this signification into being. The glamorous word repeats, while effacing it, the original crisis: it, too, hits him in the face and reveals the existence of Another, of a Gaze directed at Genet; but this Other is kindly, for it is the I-who-is-Another, it is Genet himself. Poetry is the antidote of the original condemnation; it appears when the word leads him to suspect a secret order of language and a secret conformity of language with the hidden aspect of things; the word is therefore manifestly addressed to an absence; it gives proof of God by the necessity of a consciousness that deciphers its esoteric meaning. The glamorous word is the one which creates in Genet the sudden impression that we are *spoken* rather than that we speak and that, through the words which we think we are assembling in order to communicate with our fellows, the World is addressing messages to God. And the emotion is a *happy* one; Genet has been allowed to discover the trace of this message, to have a foretaste of this secret language within our language. This is proof that he is of the elect, that he is on the side of God. He goes even further: his certainty of being *the only one* to catch a glimpse of the other face of speech manifests to him that he is the sole elect or, if one prefers,

* This passage involves a play on words which it is difficult to render fully in English. The word "yard" is to be taken in both the nautical sense and the obsolete sexual sense of penis.—Translator's note.

that he is his *own elect.* He has only to repeat the glamorous word to assure himself of the existence of an intelligible order in which he occupies first place:

"At times, during my most harrowing moments . . . I sing within me that poem, 'The Yard-On,' which I do not apply to anyone but which comforts me and dries unwelled tears as I sail across becalmed seas, a sailor of the crew which sailed around 1700 on the frigate *Culafroy.*"

Genet assigns himself his task: he will be a huntsman of glamorous words, he will repeat them inwardly in order to designate the situation in which he finds himself: they will be God-traps, for they require a witness who transfigures the world and Genet. At times they will be words without precise meaning but charged with a magical power of evocation:

"No episode from history or a novel organized the dream mass; only the murmur of a few magic words thickened the darkness, from which there loomed a page or horseman . . . *Natura fastuosa, Natura stramonium, Belladonna. . . .*"

"She described the blazon: 'It's argent and azure of ten pieces, over all a lion gules membered and langued. On the crest, Melusina.' It was the arms of the Lusignans. Culafroy listened to this splendid poem."

At times he will utilize the feeling of strangeness aroused in him by language and by the long mistrust that makes him review all the possible meanings of the most innocent phrases: he will hollow out a word with the aim of extracting its various meanings and will unite these meanings in a new, sumptuous and fanciful signification: the word Brazil—which evokes in him the idea of an "island beyond suns and seas, where men with rugged faces and the build of athletes squatted in the evening around huge fires . . . peeling . . . enormous oranges, with the fruit in one hand and a broad-bladed knife in the other, as, in old pictures, emperors held the scepter and the golden globe . . ."—is suddenly transformed into a "one-word poem" that "falls from this vision": the word "suns." Brazil opens its blazing plumage, lays an egg, the one-word poem, which mingles oranges and the sun within him; suns-oranges whirl in the cell. Added to this is the idea of an "acrobat in light blue tights executing the grand circle* on the horizontal bar." *The* oranges have been transformed into *several* suns; the word "sun" emits an acrobat whose body describes a circle and who has been

* Grand circle: in French, *le grand soleil* (the big sun) .—Translator's note.

saturated with the sky in the form of light blue tights. The sky turns in the sun, the sun turns in the sky, the sun is man, the orange is sun, the sun is azure-colored, the sky is sun-colored, the man turns, the man turns in his hand oranges similar to terrestrial globes, to suns. Everything is given in the words, but *as an absence:* what human eye could see these contradictory splendors simultaneously in the unity of a single image? But the image *is to be seen,* and it is its flagrant absence that reveals the Other in his solitude. It is the Other who will see it, who *sees* it.

At other times, words will be used to effect symbolic transmutations:

"Each of us so eagerly desired a God that this God had to be born and manifest himself every time we needed him to justify our maddest acts. An eighteen-year-old St. John was writing his gospel. It also happens that, when speaking about an abstract thing, we have to use images in order to define it, to make it visible. The thing is thus given an increasingly concrete life. It is quickened by the sap transfused by the images. Before long, it detaches itself from them and, defined by concrete qualifiers, lives with its own life. That was what happened to the Reformatory. I would sometimes refer to it as 'the old lady,' and then as 'the strict lady.' These two expressions would probably not have been enough for me to make her merge with a woman, but, in addition to the fact that they usually qualify mothers, they occurred to me in connection with the Reformatory at a time when I was weary of my solitude as a lost child and my soul yearned for a mother, and for everything that is peculiar to women: tenderness, slightly nauseating whiffs from the half-open mouth . . . I endowed the Reformatory with all these ridiculous and touching attributes until it assumed, in my mind, the physical image of a woman and there was established between us a union of soul to soul which exists only between mother and son . . . I reached the point of addressing invocations to it. . . . It was the mystical period. . . ."

The "images" of which he speaks are not tangible figures but metaphors. In Genet, the image is rarely visual; it remains a secret cleft in words. The procedure which will make a mother of the Reformatory is similar to that which we described in connection with argot. Genet refuses to name his object by the proper term, which is ignominious; the gap which is thus created is filled by substantified adjectives that designate marginal and metaphoric qualities of the object considered: *la vieille* (the old lady), *la sévère* (the strict lady). He proceeds exactly as would an aphasic in his desperate effort to

express himself. But, at the same time, he transfigures reality by virtue of the real content of the words he uses. He changes the punitive resentment of society into tender and maternal solicitude and transforms the careless gesture with which it thrusts him aside into the act of love of a divinity that is testing him. *Son* of the old lady, he is the *elect* of the Reformatory. And this absent mother becomes a divinity, that is, she merges with one of the multiple forms adopted by the Other, a divine Proteus, that Genet wants to be for himself.

At times, words which he utters in his throat without moving his lips beget gestures which are themselves ballets that are danced before the inner divinity:

"He saw that he would have to turn about so as not to walk on the lawn. As he watched himself moving, he thought: 'He spun about,' and the word 'spun,' immediately caught on the wing, made him about-face smartly."

The reader will note that Culafroy refers to himself in the third person. "He spun about." He does not exactly assume the viewpoint of the Other; rather, he speaks of himself to the Other as the Other would speak of him. The statement is a trap; it opens out on an absence. And its magnificence comes not from its signification but from the obscure import of the syllables *"volte"** which evoke for him a luxurious little movement, such as might be made by a great lord.

The glamorous, sacred, dizzying words will little by little become adornments; he puts them around the necks of thieves, of convicts, he bedecks their hair with them. But they have ceased to designate. He counts on the Other to make them meaningful.

"The words 'beautiful' and 'beauty' . . . have a power that lies in their very matter. They no longer signify anything intelligible. I use them as one puts a diamond on a gown, and not for it to serve as a button."

So Genet has become a poet. But let there be no misunderstanding: his poetry is not a literary art, it is a means of salvation. He does not write or recite his poems, which, moreover, are often reduced to a single word. Poetry does not issue forth from him, it is not intended for a public: it is a way of life. He magnifies his abjection so as to be able to bear it and he dedicates his poems to a divine absence. Is he aware that he is a poet? Not at all. He knows that he is defending himself against death. An abandoned child, disheartened by his solitude, is trying to be two in one: that is the

* *Virevolter:* to spin about.—Translator's note.

origin of this extraordinary endeavor. The appearance of the word-poem is still only one of the secondary aspects of his effort to become the Other that he is in the eyes of others. It will enable us, however, to penetrate more deeply into his consciousness and to overhear his inner monologue. When Joyce reports to us the soliloquies of Mr. Bloom, they seem to be our own; we recognize the unconstraint, the complicity with oneself in abandon, the damp tenderness, the crushed, broken words, which roll off almost unnoticed because we are too sluggish to pronounce them entirely. Genet's inner monologue, on the other hand, unrolls in the presence of a divine witness. That mind does not know abandonment: it is rigged, it is taut, even in its most secret places; it becomes incantation, a prayer, a thanksgiving, whereas ours is frittered away in vague reveries. It does not let itself be guided by the external world, but interprets it. No doubt the inner monologue of the little tramp displays the same discontinuity as that of Mr. Bloom, but it does so in a quite different sense: from the confusion of subjective impressions spring whole words, word-poems: yard-on, spun about, the strict lady. They are rockets that set the darkness on fire, then fall and burn out. And it is not an inner sweetness of words already understood that imparts to them their poetic value: quite the contrary, they are glazed, varnished, stately, they are addressed to another and flee Genet in the night of unknowing: "Allusive words reduced to equal silence," like those of Mallarmé. One of Genet's most constant traits, which is evident even in his conversation, is his contempt for anecdote. His life appeared to him very early as a succession of negligible sketches from which he had simply, before letting them sink into oblivion, to extract the poetic essence, not by making them epical, in the manner of certain mythomaniacs who reconstruct their lives as they go along, but by culling the word that polarized, interpreted and transfigured them and that condensed their poetic substance in order to offer it to a divine absence. This raw poetry is a prodigious endeavor to save the sacred amidst the shipwreck of profane man.

But the *locale* of the poems shifts: it is now *within Genet* that chance produces them. The lonely adolescent's attention to words and the waxy flexibility of inner language finally result in the welling up of fragments of poems, of isolated lines.

Driven away everywhere, the young Cain roves about, in Spain, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia. He is twenty years old, twenty-two. He walks in silence. Yet at every breath words fill his mouth. They

come all by themselves, as in dreams. The rhythm of his pace and breath gives rise to vague phrases which break beneath their own weight. To whom is he speaking? To nobody. No intention of designating, of communicating, of teaching. And who is speaking? Nobody. Or rather, language itself. And what is language when it speaks to itself if not the world with its suns, its breezes, its marble steps and its flower gardens, *the world producing itself in the verbal attribute?* The Word is an attribute of the divine substance, and the infinite succession of its particular modes expresses the substance by the same token as does the succession of extensive modes. These phrases which assemble by themselves have the inertia of material figures. Genet listens to them, he observes without intervening. This passivity is partly feigned: it is he who utters the words. It is true that the rhythm of his pace determines his breathing, that he feels the beat even in his throat, that it creates verbal patterns, selects words; it is true that Genet does not think, that he is thought; it is true that by dint of repeating the words with which he enraptures himself he engenders, by virtue of assonance, alliteration and external similitude, units of sound composed of agglutinative words; it is true that he is sometimes surprised by these conglomerates. But this policy of nonintervention is calculated: its aim is to capture the world; the more independence he allows words, the more they will resemble things; the less the verbal automatism is directed, the better it will represent the Necessity of Nature; if language plays freely, little by little Being will be caught up in it and reflected in it: Genet will contain the universe. If, on the other hand, he wanted to regain control of words, to associate them first in accordance with their meaning, to speak, things would jump back, he would relapse into prose. In short, Genet observes with respect to words, which are *tools*, the quietistic attitude he adopted toward all utensils: he waits for them to offer him, by themselves, inhuman dreams, as the garments of the nun offered him sacrilegious gestures. And the result is not slow in showing itself: one day, when he is roaming through the countryside, frightened in the presence of the "diurnal mystery" of Nature, a clot of words emerges from his mouth; this conglomerate turns out to be more solid than the others, it is an octosyllable: "The first line of verse which to my amazement I found myself composing was the following: *Moissoneur des souffles coupés.*"*

This cluster is not even a sentence: it contains neither negation

* *Moissoneur des souffles coupés:* harvester of cut breaths.—Translator's note.

nor affirmation. A verbal entity owes its unity to a negative or affirmative movement. The sentence *is* because my activity synthetically unites each word to the preceding word and the following one; it "hangs together" because I involve myself in it entirely and intend, by means of it, to express a will. Nothing of the kind happens here: we are not stating that anyone *is* a "harvester of cut breaths," we do not even say that such a harvester exists. The verse would vanish were it not for the extreme cohesion that comes from its material organization: it stands up because the elements composing it have gathered according to certain affinities of sound and certain rhythms; its shape retains the memory of a respiratory rhythm; inertia substitutes in it for freedom. If it *designated* a harvester, an intention would have bracketed the words, but the fact is that it designates nothing; it quite simply *is:* there is nothing to conclude from it and one cannot conclude it from anything. What can one conclude from the sun, from the crowing of the cock? They are. A body does not affirm, one cannot even say that it affirms itself; it is a being which perseveres in its being. No sooner does this monolithic block emerge from Genet than it stands before him like a thing.

Things signify nothing. Yet each of them has a meaning. By *signification* I mean a certain conventional relationship which makes a present object the substitute of an absent object; by *meaning* I denote the participation of the being of a present reality in the being of other realities, whether present or absent, visible or invisible, and, eventually, in the universe. Signification is conferred upon the object from without by a signifying intention; meaning is a natural quality of things. The former is a transcendent relationship between one object and another; the latter, a transcendence that has fallen into immanence. The first can prepare for an intuition, can orient it, but cannot furnish it since the object signified is, in essence, external to the sign; the second is by nature intuitive; it is the odor that permeates a handkerchief, the perfume that issues from an empty open bottle. The siglum "XVII" *signifies* a certain century, but in museums that entire period clings like a veil, like a spider's web, to the curls of a wig, escapes in whiffs from a sedan chair. In producing his first poem as an object, Genet transforms the *signification* of the words into a *meaning.* When we first encounter it, it is inert and voluminous, like a carriage or a wig; it indicates nothing; it refers only to itself; it is at first only a sounded rhythm that imposes itself on our breathing; and it is only after repeating it as a refrain that we discover in it a vague and, as it were, natural

savor. It would be a waste of time to look for logical organization in it: it expresses, without differentiating, the countryside and fear, the diurnal mystery of Nature: all things interpenetrate. *Harvester,* which is still redolent of ripe wheat, falls into line with *cutting,* which vaguely suggests the sickle's biting at plant stems; at the same time, "breathing" and "cutting" are coupled and awake in us the locution *"couper le souffle,"** which colors the verse with its unpleasant shade of meaning. In Genet, the ceremony is always corrected by cynicism; in this very pompous verse is concealed, like a trapdoor, a very familiar expression. To cut stems, to cut breath: if the verse actually signified, we would have to choose. But the fact is that we do not choose; the two meanings spread blindly through each other and coexist without merging or conflicting. In addition, "harvester" evokes the vague idea of a person; I am even fairly certain that it derives from a reminiscence: "What God, what harvester of the eternal summer . . ."; in any case, it is difficult for the reader not to recall vaguely, like a harmonic, this line from Hugo's "Booz endormi." We shall see, moreover, that Genet's poems draw their substance from famous poems whose blood they suck. Isn't that logical? These demoniacal, baneful poems are the parasites of official poetry as Evil is the parasite of Good. "Harvester" is thus haunted by the invisible idea of "rustic God": these words are surrounded by a vague atmosphere of countryside and divinity. However, as we do not know whether the countryside is God or whether God traverses it, the absence of subject preserves the concrete meaning of the word and its vague, pastoral overtones (summer, work in the fields, etc.). I can imagine Ponge amusing himself by singing the praises of a trapezist and calling him *"moissoneur des souffles coupés."* The verse would thereby gain in logical signification. The triumph that the acrobat harvests every evening is the thrill provoked by his boldness. And I can also imagine Genet himself magnifying a criminal who mounts the scaffold and whose proud attitude imposes respect: no one dares to breathe. But in both cases the word "harvester" would exchange its meaning for an abstract signification. Thus, we say: "a rich harvest of this or that" without for a single moment thinking of farm work; the circus lights or the gleam of the blade would extinguish the weak country sun. But this word is here neither entirely substantive (since it is neither subject, predicate nor complement) nor entirely an adjective (since *nobody* is a harvester); it is even, to some extent, a verb: someone

* Literally, "to cut (someone's) breath"; the French expression is the equivalent of the English "to take (someone's) breath away."—Translator's note.

harvests, the act is suggested without being shown. In this indefinite vocable, quality, event, accident and substance interpenetrate, and that is precisely what happens when we consider a *thing,* water, for example, which we envisage, at the same time, as a certain quality of the world, a calm substance and the effect of an incessant movement of atoms. Since the words *are* without *being affirmed,* since no consciousness effects a selection among their different acceptations, the latter are all present simultaneously.

Although "harvester" vaguely personalizes the countryside, "cut breaths" depersonalizes the men who move about in it. In certain circumstances, a human being's breath *is* taken away. In substantializing breath and in not mentioning the being who possesses it, Genet makes the human vanish from the face of the earth; he peoples the countryside with invisible plants whose stems are columns of air. Yet an *allusion* is made to man by the word "cut," not because of its signification, but because it evokes a proverbial locution which is ordinarily applied to persons. A vague allusion since the locution is not present in its entirety. Actually, *to cut* exercises upon "breath" a twofold and conflicting influence. On the one hand, it tends—because of the traditional association: to take one's breath away—to bring this vocable back to the original meaning: air exhaled by the lungs. But, on the other hand, it undergoes the attraction, from a distance, of the word "harvester," which forces it to evoke a particular operation in farm work (cutting stems with a sickle), and in this new acceptation it tends to draw the word "breaths" along with it: if *cutting* is a concrete, technical operation, then *breath* becomes a stem, since it represents the matter which is acted upon. The contradiction which is determined in "cut" by the conflicting influence of the word *harvester* and of the locution *to take one's breath away* is thus transmitted to *breath,* which expresses, in the syncretic unity of a meaning, the idea of breathing and the idea of plant, of grain. And this indetermination is heightened by the fact that *breaths* precedes *cut:* it is read or heard (therefore understood) before being determined by this participle; the effect of the latter will be retroactive, hence weakened; *breaths* manifests a kind of independence which is due to its being plural (in the proverbial locution it is always in the singular) and limply orients us toward the idea of breeze, of zephyr: light breaths waft through the countryside. Three significations interpenetrate in this word: wind, plant, breathing, in a kind of whirligig. And as it is the vegetable idea that finally prevails, without succeeding in quite eliminating the other meanings, all these

respirations arrange themselves in orderly fashion and gravitate about a circular stroke of a scythe. Thereupon, an inversion is effected in our vision of things: I usually regard nature as a collection of phenomena which my consciousness unifies synthetically by the "I think" and the act of perception. But Genet's verse prompts us to imagine Nature as a vaguely personified power whose movement reunites in a kind of roundelay the rural plants that we have become. In short, the verse bears witness to the amazement of the young hoodlum feeling himself become an object for the great petrifying gaze of things; it contains, in an indistinct state, the intuition that Genet has described in prose in *The Thief's Journal:* "I had just come to know, as a result of fear, an uneasiness in the presence of diurnal nature, at a time when the French countryside where I wandered about, chiefly at night, was peopled all over with the ghost of Vacher, the killer of shepherds. As I walked through it, I would listen within me to the accordion tunes he must have played there, and I would mentally invite the children to come and offer themselves to the cutthroat's hands. . . . Nature disturbed me, giving rise within me to the spontaneous creations of fabulous fauna, or of situations and accidents, whose fearful and enchanted prisoner I was." The reader will notice that the prose does not succeed in achieving the fusion of the mystery of Nature and the human mystery of Vacher. The countryside is "peopled all over with the ghost of Vacher": that is where the language of general communication stops. The verse expresses the countryside's *being* Vacher. Not that Vacher is purely and simply identified with the harvester: if he were, we would not leave the realm of prose; the verse must retain the ambiguity of natural things: it is great Nature which, by its terrifying mystery, takes Genet's breath away, and it is Vacher the killer who harvests beautiful children; dying of surprise, Genet is changed into a pebble, into a lump of earth in the deserted yet living countryside, just as a child is changed into a corpse in the hands of the murderer. But this statement is still too logical: it distinguishes, contrasts and compares. And it would be too prosaic to say that Genet engages, through Nature, in pagan worship of Vacher, a sinister god Pan. No, the verse is *entirely* the mystery of Nature and it is *entirely* Vacher. "What? Is it possible to say all that in eight syllables?" I reply: no, one cannot *say* it. Besides, a line *means* nothing at all: man and nature, murder and harvest, it *does not express* Genet's feeling: it *is* that feeling become thing, floating through the words, participating in the inertia of the sound unit and retaining, within its immanence, only a stale mem-

ory of its past transcendence. The words designated the world: Genet has put the world into the words; but in so doing he himself has crept into it. This sad, stunted verse achieves the unity of the subject and the object.

Our vagabond plays at capturing the universe. He does not create, but he makes himself the theater of Creation; he is not a poet, but he poetizes. Poems are born in him, like crimes; language turns away from its original destination. But we know him sufficiently to be aware that the game of creation must have a reverse side: if he captures the world, he certainly does so in order to destroy it.

Let us return to our octosyllable: it is understood that we cannot comprehend it. But the words are not only juxtaposed; they are united by logical connections over and above their sonant and rhythmic affinities: "breaths" is the "noun complement" of "harvester," "cut" is an adjective that modifies "breaths"; we are thus prompted by the grammatical structure of this sound unit to effect certain significations, as the mathematician effects the operations indicated in a polynomial although the quantities he manipulates are represented by symbols and he must always be unaware of the numerical results of his work. Now, if the mind, following the operative indications, beyond the trembling little soul of the verse, seeks to effect the formal and abstract significations that shimmer at the surface of this nonsignifying unit, everything sinks into nothingness, everything—even the poetic meaning—is canceled with a play on words. We expect the harvest of cut grain to be fine and rich; but these grains are breaths, and a cut breath is only the stopping of a breath, that is, nothing, not even a bit of air that one exhales: one will make sheaves of nothingness. The strange being who haunted the woods, whether woodland god or criminal, was defined only by his functions: having become a harvester of nothing, he vanishes with the breaths, everything is canceled; the rocky, compact density of this sound unit and the shimmering of the light around the stone concealed a cold, dark emptiness. A signification beyond the syncretic interpenetration of the meanings was suggested to us; and this signification is the destruction of all signification, the challenging of all prose; Genet put the whole countryside into this verse, but only to annihilate it. The capturing of the world, an act guided by resentment, ends in catastrophe. We find Genet in his entirety in this abrupt reversal, Genet with his loves and betrayals, his perpetual whirligigs of being and nonbeing. To be sure, he wanted to possess the universe; he abandoned himself to the Word; he played at quietistic contemplation; but he betrayed

from below; his abstractedness was only a feint: underneath, this sly prestidigitator was composing without seeming to and let pass only the words that could serve him. If he applied himself with such passion to giving words a semblance of objective being, he did so in order the better to annihilate the being of the world. The verse was a trap; it appeared to be inert, abandoned; it was language without men; the universe let itself be caught in it. But no sooner did it descend into the words than everything vanished: one thought that the verse *meant* nothing; the fact is, it *meant to say nothing.*

The pages which Blanchot has written about Mallarmé apply admirably to Genet: "In the first place, language is characterized by a contradiction: in a general way, it is that which destroys the world in order to re-engender it in the realm of meaning, of significant 'values'; but in its creative form it settles only on the negative aspect of its task and becomes a pure power of contestation and transfiguration. . . . That is possible insofar as, taking on a tangible value, it becomes itself a thing, a body, an incarnate power. The real presence and material affirmation of language give it power to seize and dismiss the world. Density and thickness of sound are necessary for it to release the silence which it contains and which is the element of nothingness without which it would never give rise to a new meaning. Thus, it needs to be infinitely in order to produce the feeling of an absence—and to become similar to things in order to break up our natural relationships with them."*

Thus, the word is both a sonant object and a vehicle of signification. If you direct your attention to the signification, the word is effaced; you go beyond it and fuse the meaning with the thing signified. If, however, you are exiled from the universe and are attentive only to the verbal body, which is the only reality you can possess and hold between your tongue and lips, then it is the thing signified which disappears and the signification becomes a vanishing of being, a mist which, beyond the word, is in the process of being dissipated. Genet makes it his business to have eyes only for the word; the universe, captured and inserted into the statement, goes up in smoke. But this poetic procedure, far from liberating the poet, enslaves him further: Genet remains in Hell. He is not clearly aware of himself as a creative power: in aspiring to submit to the powers of language and to allow the vocables to arrange themselves within him according to their affinities in order to pro-

* *Faux-pas,* N.R.F., p. 44.

duce, as Mallarmé says, "the notion of an escaping object which is wanting," he absents himself from speech and lets it sound alone in the desert. Blanchot also says: "If language isolates itself from man as it isolates man from all things, if it is never the act of someone who speaks with a view to being understood by someone, we shall realize that it offers to the one who considers it in this state of solitude the spectacle of a peculiar and quite magical power. It is a kind of consciousness without subject which, separated from being, is a detachment, a challenge, an infinite power of creating emptiness and of situating itself in a want."*

### *4. The Rejection of History*

So Cain flees from the sight of God. The power of becoming an object, which has devolved upon all of us, has been exaggerated in him and been transformed into a permanent objectivity: *visibility* is his very substance; he is because he is perceived. For him, the world, even before it is divided into trees, rivers, houses, animals and people, is a gaze that draws him from nothingness, envelops him, condemns him. Things are eyes. They keep him at a distance. He glides on the surface of being, thrust back by the light that escapes from the leaves, from the corollas, from the windows and that exposes him to everyone. In order to defend himself he steps back and views himself in perspective; he looks at *himself* being looked at; a soft, transparent consciousness inserts itself between his reflective consciousness and the world. Being keeps him at a distance and he stands aside from being. He is the sole object of those millions of eyes and *his* sole object. From time to time, being rips apart like a piece of cloth, a *miracle* has taken place; for a fleeting moment Genet touches his life on things; he has the amazing privilege of being able to total up his life, of gathering it up within that instant, he is a sacred totality for himself.

Whence an essential feature of this adolescence: Genet has no *history*. Or, if he does have one, it is behind him. In order for a man to have a history, he must evolve, the course of the world must change him in changing itself, and he must change in changing the world, his life must depend on everything and on himself alone, he must discover in it, at the moment of death, a vulgar product of the age and the singular achievement of his will. A historical life

* Blanchot adds (p. 48): "Perhaps this trickery is the truth of all written things." At this point I cease to follow him. He should, from this point of view, distinguish between poetry and prose and, in the case of prose, examine different types of writing.

is full of chance events, of encounters: one met one's future brother-in-law in a prison camp; a certain woman, for whom one thought one would die of love, in the course of a journey. The future is uncertain, we are our own risk, the world is our peril: we cannot exist in any time for ourself as a totality.

Genet is a totality for himself. He receives, at certain privileged moments, the power to see his entire life, from the "sweet natural confusion" to the penal colony and death. This is tantamount to saying that his undertaking is *done* and that nothing can act upon him from without. His only purpose, his only chance of salvation, is to act upon himself on the level of reflection, so as to accept unreservedly, with love, the horrible destiny in store for him.

It is quite true that he wanders about the world and that he has more adventures in a week than many men in a year. And yet nothing happens to him: in acting too strongly upon that soul when it was still young and tender, the world blocked it. Between the ages of fifteen, when he was at Mettray, and twenty-five, when he committed his first burglary, ten years go by without marking him. No doubt he sinks little by little to the depths of abjection, but he does so by his own weight; and besides, this abjection hardly affects him. Filthy, ragged, debased, hopeless, he prostitutes himself and begs. Is he more abject, more desolate than in the days when the little Mettray toughs made a butt of him? The original crisis raised horror to its highest pitch at the very beginning: it seems that nothing can increase it. The swift, brutal events that fill his daily life can *reveal* his destiny to him in an ecstasy of love or fright; none of them has the power to *make it.*

Theft, prison, what can they bring him? We have seen that his larcenies destroy both himself and objects. But the soul is elastic: after the ceremony of theft, Genet finds himself to be what he has always been, like the Christian after Mass. The *miracles of horror* make him enjoy his life but do not transform him, for he reacts to each of them in the same way. Compare the various episodes in *Our Lady of the Flowers, Miracle of the Rose* and *The Thief's Journal:* the event varies, but Genet's ritual conduct does not change a jot.* Little Culafroy notes that the sole of his shoe is torn. Immediately he abandons himself to the muscular arms of the angels, who carry him off to paradise. Youngsters amuse themselves

* Cf. a similar antihistoricism in Jean Cocteau: "The rhythm of our life develops in periods, all of them alike, except that they present themselves in a way that makes them unrecognizable. The event-trap or the person-trap is all the more dangerous in that it itself is governed by the same law and wears the mask sincerely" *(Opium).*

in covering the hero of *Miracle of the Rose* with gobs of spit: it is roses that they throw at him, a rain of flowers. Policemen amuse themselves with the tube of vaseline that they have found in his pocket: the tube, in its royal inertia, holds its own against them, disturbs them and radiates. As soon as the humiliation appears, it is effaced, "overcompensated for" by an invariable mechanism. The poetic miracles themselves are powerless to affect him, for it is he who produces them: "Poetry," he says, "is willful." As for his human relationships, they are all of the same type: his love is unrequited. But this secret will-to-be-unloved, this crafty refusal of reciprocity, is a way of keeping others at a distance: in one of Huxley's novels, the hero, who is shy and disdainful, gives big tips to waiters so as to avoid entering into contact with them. Genet, who is even more disdainful, imagines giving himself entirely so as to discourage friendship. The mad loves of Genet the Victim are rejected friendships. Moreover, he knows this very well, and we have only to let him talk in order to understand how the praying mantis kills its males and eats them in order to absorb them into its own substance.

Hearing him, one gets the impression that he always falls in love at first sight. The mere appearance one evening of Darling or Bulkaen or Stilitano overwhelms the victim. That is something *new,* the sudden intrusion of the unexpected; time staggers and destiny shifts. Later, Genet will take pleasure in magnifying by glittering words the memory of these amorous encounters. But he lies: one of the most singular characteristics of this overdetermined soul is that nothing ever *happens* to it. Or rather, it considers novelty to be negligible: novelty is the anecdote, the particular and fortuitous circumstance that he disregards in order to go straight to the essence, the contingency that conceals the ineluctable necessity, the profane matter through which he receives the sacred. The hosts are all new, they were blessed on a certain day, at a certain hour. But who cares about these sealing wafers? The faithful is mindful only of the eternal, eternally repeated union of the Christian soul with its God. The truth is that Genet never *encounters* anybody. He never sees a contingent, a particular creature moving toward him out of the night or from the back of a bar, a creature who would have to be observed, studied, comprehended: let a good-looking pimp or a sailor appear and he will *recognize* them right away, he will perceive the essence that they manifest: he sees *the* tough, *the* sailor; future and past become identical in a kind of prophetic, fatalistic and weary intuition. In like manner, the Platonic soul

is awakened by the sight of tangible objects to a reminiscence of the archetypes which it formerly contemplated. *The* sailor, *the* criminal: Genet has known them from time immemorial; he knows that he has always been submissive to the Eternal who goes by in the form of a pimp. If he breaks down in the presence of the handsome murderer, it is because he *re-experiences* this submission as a hereditary bondage and as the terrible prefiguration of his future. Stilitano approaches him and "although it was he who made the first advance, I knew, as I answered, the *almost desperate nature of the gesture the invert dares when he approaches a young man.*" What is Stilitano if not *the* tough? And Genet, if not *the* invert? And what is there between them if not *the* desperate gesture that the invert dares in the presence of a handsome young man? Genet lives in the midst of an Italian comedy in which Scapin, Pantaloon and Pulcinella are replaced by Chéri-bibi the convict, Rocambole the burglar, Javert the detective, Fantomas the prince of crime.* These are traditional fictions, of social origin. The criminal, the soldier, the traitor, the sailor, the jailor, the prisoner are born of the popular imagination; they haunt tales and legends; they are to be found even today in music-hall songs; for centuries their function has been to reflect to the multitude their nocturnal terrors and dreams of adventure, their fears and the grim ruminations of their resentment; ambivalent figures, baneful and tutelary, they will become—depending on one's mood—the fierce Cartouche or the magnanimous Lupin. Genet has fed on the serial stories which are the *chansons de geste* of these plebeian heroes. As a poor child, he participates in the collective reverie of the poor. This imagery, which is somewhat outdated, provides him with the great dignitaries of his black nobility. All his companions have been present for a long time, he knows their exploits and their roles by heart. But from time to time an actor lends them his gestures or voice. Through Stilitano, the one-armed Barcelona hoodlum, Genet discerns the Tough, his eternal love, just as Jean-Louis Barrault, when playing Hamlet, discerns Polonius, the old Danish pimp, through M. Brunot, ex-dean of the Comédie-Française. Only a few minutes ago Genet did not know Stilitano; now he is speaking to him and his legs tremble: yet nothing has happened, except that some gold dust has materialized a ray of light. Here is the description of another encounter; the mechanism is clearly apparent:

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* Chéri-bibi, Rocambole, etc.: characters in well-known French serial stories.—Translator's note.

"Had he not spat in his hands to turn a crank, I would never have noticed a boy of my age. This gesture, which workmen make, made me so dizzy that I thought I was falling* straight down to a period—or region of myself—long since forgotten. My heart awoke, and at once my body thawed. With wild speed and precision the boy registered on me: his gestures, his hair, the jerk of his hips, the curve of his back, the merry-go-round on which he was working, the movements of the horses, the music, the fairground, the city of Antwerp containing them, the Earth cautiously turning, the Universe protecting so precious a burden, and I standing there, frightened at possessing the world and at knowing I possessed it.

"I did not see the spit on his hands: I recognized the puckering of the cheek, and the tip of the tongue between his teeth. I again saw the chap rubbing his tough, black palms. As he bent down to grab the handle, I noticed his crackled, but thick, leather belt. A belt of that kind could not be an ornament like the kind that holds up the trousers of a man of fashion. By its material and thickness it was penetrated with the following function: holding up the most obvious sign of masculinity which, without this strap, would be nothing, would no longer contain, would no longer guard its manly treasure but would tumble down on the heels of a shackled male. The boy was wearing a windbreaker. As the belt was not inserted into loops, at every movement it rose a bit as the pants slid down, revealing his skin. I stared at the belt, petrified. I saw it operating surely. At the sixth jerk of the hip, it girdled—except at the fly where the two ends were buckled—the chap's bare back and waist."

A passer-by who looks at a woman is sensitive only to personal details: a supple body, a triangular face, the sinuous faintness of a smile.† But it will be observed that in Genet's account the young boy remains undifferentiated. Had it not been for that chance gesture, Genet would not even have noticed him. Thus, it is *a gesture* that provokes his ecstasy: not even an act, a gesture. The workman's effort is in danger of making it ungraceful; in addition, it is too austere, it reminds the thief of the disconcerting existence of the proletariat. The gesture of spitting in his hands, which is a small rite, a ballet figure, evokes labor while remaining quite inefficacious

* It will be observed that the word *fall* designates in Genet, at one and the same time, the state of the criminal who consents to his crime, that of the poet who turns a felicitous phrase and that of the homosexual who recognizes his destiny in the features of a handsome man.

† I am simplifying in order to stress the differences. Masculine desire is not exempt from symbolic patterns; it has generalized structures. The fact remains that the male who "hunts" is seeking a new adventure; he wants to vary his life.

and gratuitous. It manifests virile transcendency, but without setting it at grips with objects: it is only *presented, acted;* in like manner, the useless muscles of Pimps display a power which is never of use to them. And the young man's movements no doubt have a certain beauty, but although this condition is necessary, it is not sufficient to awaken Genet's attention. What matters first is that the gesture is immediately perceived as typical. It is a "gesture which workmen make," not an ephemeral shudder on that particularly unique day. He employs a frequentative verb, half abstract, already generalized. The gesture is not even a copy of an attitude issued in millions of copies. The attitude itself, so pure in its beauty that it is no longer anyone's and that it is struck for its own sake, opens out like a fan and masks the child. Genet contemplates human labor, which is being danced before the eyes of a god; if he desires to be possessed, it is by all the young workmen of the world. But the gesture is thereby *recognized,* not perceived, it is prophesied and remembered at the same time: "I thought I was falling straight down to a period—or region of myself—long since forgotten." Starting from there, he "registers" the young boy, but only to fail once again to grasp his individual reality. A moment before, the boy was reduced to a symbolic gesture; now, he becomes diluted in the universe. Finally, he is only an unbalanced mediation between the totality of being and the choreographic figuration of human transcendency. Of course, no sooner is this totality given than Genet liberates himself from it and re-enters himself. In the movement of heterosexual ecstasy, desire is projected outward, the male forgets himself, he is only the delicate light which envelops the silk of a foreign flesh and makes it glow. Genet, on the other hand, returns to himself, he loses himself in order to find himself. The *recognized* gesture sends him back to the world and the world back to himself; he remains "frightened at possessing the world and at knowing I possessed it." That is, he shelves the world: if he does "possess" the universe, it is not in the manner of emperors or captains of industry who boast of leaving their mark on it, but in that of a contemplative who discovers that "the world is its representation." And in this great body of *things perceived,* a gesture stands out, object of an aesthetic intuition, which reflects to Genet only what Genet has put into it: it is the appearance to which the Thief has assigned the function of delivering to him the totality of appearances.

Nevertheless, this primary apprehension does not suffice. The amorous soul that swirls about a small earthly brilliance must

swoop down on a concrete detail and carry it off in its talons. Now, it is noteworthy that the erotic object which Genet will choose remains a pure symbol: it is neither the young boy's face nor his hair nor even his legs or rump; it is a detail of his outfit, to wit, a badly attached belt. Genet is, in this case, like the "fetishist" who prefers a woman's shoes to the woman who wears them. The belt excites him *by its function:* it "is holding up the most obvious sign of masculinity." No doubt the flesh is present in his perception: he sees the young man's bare back. But it does not excite him directly: it is the passive background against which the movement of the belt appears, or, if one prefers, in sliding up and down the belt engenders by its caresses that soft, inert and polished matter as the mathematician, in laying out a circle, brings forth the surface of the circumference from an undifferentiated space. For this eroticism without sensuality, the privileged object is not the flesh but the gesture; the flesh subtends the pantomime as connective tissue unites vital organs.

After that, is the boy good-looking? The question is meaningless. An adorable gesture has alighted on a human being, like a pigeon on a statue: all that one asks of the flesh which carries this movement is that it not draw attention to itself. Stilitano, who represents for a time the gangster, is required only to have the right physique for the role, to "be the character," that is, to have a sufficiently terrible bearing to act out his role in the ritual ceremonies of love. Genet will then speak of his lover's *beauty*. But this beauty remains abstract; it does not live. A heterosexual experiences the beauty of his mistress, discovers it beneath the makeup, learns each day how fatigue decomposes it toward evening and how art composes it anew; it changes from minute to minute, depending on whether he moves away or draws nearer. Stilitano's beauty is stiff and fixed: the reason is that he does not possess it in his own right; it is that of the Tough of Toughs, eternal and impassive, which can neither increase nor decrease nor change. In like manner, Ophelia's face, on the stage, is given all at once, and at a fixed distance: if one approaches it, it grows blurred and disappears, revealing, like a mask that has been removed, the painted young face of the actress. Genet wants Stilitano's beauty to keep him at a distance; it is from afar that it holds up, that it fulfills its function, which is to *represent* the fatality of crime. Stilitano, Bulkaen, Darling, all of them together, have only a single beauty, that of the archetype which, each in turn, they embody for Genet.

The ice is broken: they speak to each other, Genet follows Stili-

tano, they are going to live together. Are real relationships going to be established between them? Not at all. Genet suddenly discovers the nigger in the woodpile: Stilitano is playing the role of Stilitano. What he wants is to *appear* to be the Tough whom Genet wants to love in him. The two men secretly smell each other out and, without even admitting it to himself, each is aware that the other is an actor: "Stilitano was playing. He liked knowing that he was outside the law; he liked feeling that he was in danger. An aesthetic need placed him there. He was attempting to copy an ideal hero, the Stilitano whose image was already inscribed in a heaven of glory. . . . Blinded at first by his august solitude, by his calmness and serenity, I believed him to be anarchically self-creating, guided by the sheer impudence, the nerviness, of his gestures. The fact is, *he was seeking a type*. Could it have been the one represented by the conquering hero in the comic books?" As a matter of fact, it is precisely with this comic-book hero that Genet wants to have dealings. He doesn't care the least about the particular features of the flesh-and-blood Stilitano, his weaknesses, his contingency, the slightly insipid flavor of this poisonous fruit, the details of his history. These matters are only the anecdote. He pays attention to them only in order to extract from them the elements amenable to transfiguration: "For every behavior, however weird in appearance, I knew at once, without thinking, a justification. The strangest gesture or attitude seemed to me to correspond to an inner necessity. . . . Every comment I heard, however preposterous, appeared to me to be made at exactly the right moment. I would therefore have gone to penitentiaries, prisons, would have known low dives, stations, roads, without being surprised. If I think back, I do not find in my memory any of those characters which an eye different from mine, a more amused eye, would have singled out." Genet's world resembles that of the chronic paranoiac: he *interprets*. He is, like Barrault, both actor and director: while playing his own role, he helps Stilitano play his, he tries to find for him situations and types of behavior which enable him to *appear:* "The quality of my love for him required that he prove his manliness. If he was the splendid beast that sparkled with ferocity, let him indulge in games worthy of it." One can surmise the patience, craftiness and knowledge of the heart that the slave needs in order to be able to "incite" the master to steal. Genet resembles the wife who "knows how to handle" her husband: he puts in a word, at the right moment, with humble and discreet insistency; he quietly pulls the strings of vanity, of the love of lucre. But, it may be

argued, at least these are real relationships: Genet knows his Stilitano "like the fingers of his hand." So he does, but his tactic is only half-conscious. He cannot make up his mind as to whether he is trying to awaken the splendid beast by tempting him with the highest danger* or whether he is trying to get a vain and stupid animal to perform the gestures necessary to the show of Evil. At bottom, he knows very well that Stilitano is a coward: "His cowardly acts themselves melt my rigor. I liked his taste for loafing." But, after all, must one be a maiden to play the role of Joan of Arc? Out of the corner of his eye Genet sees his partner's weakness, sees through his paltry bragging and penetrates to the depths of his heart. But he places this spiteful lucidity, this sharp sense of reality, in the service of the lie. Barrault, director and actor, sees Ophelia, Horatio and Polonius in like manner. If he is on the alert for real incidents that can always happen, it is out of a marginal vigilance, in order to preserve the illusion, to prevent tittering. If Ophelia forgets her lines and starts spluttering, he will be able to invent something on the spot so as to make the audience think that her spluttering is deliberate, unless she herself regains her composure and sets things straight. In that case, nobody on the stage will be fooled, but they will be grateful to her for having prevented the worst thing that could happen. Similarly, Genet the director is grateful to Stilitano the actor for maintaining, in certain difficult situations, the fiction that they are eagerly trying to impose on each other. I shall cite only one example of this complicity in putting on an act: Stilitano is in the habit of insulting fairies. He thereby *manifests* his manly violence. This violence is, of course, a sham: he knows very well that these timid little girls won't answer back. But one day he is mistaken in his role: he calls out to some toughs whom he has mistaken for girl queens. In like manner, Polonius, who is going to move back into a chair, may one evening misjudge the distance and fall flat on his back. "A fight seemed inevitable. One of the young men provoked Stilitano outright: 'If you're not fruit, come on and fight.' " Now Stilitano does not like to fight, and Genet knows it; he is therefore not asked to perform an act of courage but to find the gesture that will permit him to preserve an appearance of gallantry: "Stilitano felt he was in danger. My presence no longer bothered him. He said: 'After all, fellows, you're not going to fight with a cripple.' He held out his stump. But he did it with such simplicity, such sobriety, that this vile hamming,

* Always the haunting parallelism with the ethics of Claudel.

instead of disgusting me with him, ennobled him. He withdrew, not to the sound of jeers, but to a murmur expressing the discomfort of decent men discovering the misery about them. Stilitano went off slowly, protected by his outstretched stump, which was placed simply in front of him. The absence of the hand was as real and effective as a royal attribute, as the hand of justice." Polonius has got to his feet again; he is inventing, while rubbing his back, a few well-chosen words about the woes of old age that stop the laughter or at least channelize it. Barrault and Genet look at their partners gratefully: they have saved the performance. To be sure, Genet is not fooled, but the contempt that he feels in his heart does not count: what matters is that the show can go on.

Meanwhile, Genet has persuaded Stilitano to steal. They now commit burglaries together. Are these shared experiences going to instill a bit of truth into their actions? After all, they have to smash a window, break a lock, help each other: one of them is on the lookout while the other ransacks the apartment. But theft is, for Genet, a religious ceremony; the accomplice participates in it as an officiant or as an actor. "The boldness of a thief's life—and its light —would have meant nothing if Stilitano at my side had not been proof of it. My life became magnificent by men's standards since I had a friend whose beauty derived from the idea of luxury. I was the valet whose job was to look after, to dust, polish and wax, an object of great value which, however, through the miracle of friendship, belonged to me." One would think he was talking about a fetishistic object or a theatrical mask or a religious prop.

Furthermore, with Stilitano, Genet does not experience the intoxication of burglary. Stilitano is a petty pimp, a phony, who lacks what it takes to play his role in so dangerous a game: "He was too unexcited by nocturnal adventures for me to experience any real intoxication with [him]." It is in this sense that an actor can say of his partner: "He believes in his role so little that I get no pleasure out of playing mine." What Genet requires of his accomplice at the ritual moment of the burglary is a transfiguration: the thief must rise to the plane of the sacred, his temporality must become a liturgical time, he must wear a mask and tragic rags, he must reflect to Genet the sudden brilliance which Genet feels that he himself is emitting. In short, Stilitano is unable to stir the feelings: as they say in the theater, he's not "right for the role." But let us assume for a moment that Genet meets a *real* burglar, one who believes in his role, who plays it with passion: will they achieve a solid and sincere comradeship based on the sense of danger, on

mutual confidence? Genet will later do jobs with Guy, who loves burglary. Let us see what he says about him:

"It was with Guy, in France, that I was to have the profound revelation of what burglary is. When we were locked in the little lumber room waiting for night and the moment to enter the empty offices of the Municipal Pawnshop in B., Guy suddenly seemed to me inscrutable, secret. He was no longer the ordinary chap whom you happen to run into somewhere; he was a kind of destroying angel. He tried to smile. He even broke out into a silent laugh, but his eyebrows were knitted together. From within this little fairy where a hoodlum was confined there sprang forth a determined and terrifying fellow, ready for anything—and primarily for murder—if anyone made so bold as to hinder his action. He was laughing, and I thought I could read in his eyes a will to murder which might be practiced on me. The longer he stared at me, the more I had the feeling that he read in me the same determined will to be used against him."

The matter is now clear: once again we are witnessing a play of mirrors. Guy, transfigured, reflects to Genet his own transfiguration, and Genet, rigid, strained in a kind of hypnosis that provokes what psychiatrists call a "mirror imitation," in turn reflects to Guy his sacred image. Moreover, *it is death* that makes both burglars glow with a dark light. The burglary scheme—a very ordinary, mediocre project which in itself implies only the limited, mediocre risk of prison—is transformed into an inordinate project and is transcended toward the absolute of the human condition. The risk becomes total; one will kill if necessary, which means that one is ready to be killed. But this ritual celebration of death is, in actual fact, carried out in the realm of the imaginary. Would Guy have fired? I doubt it.* In any case, what is certain is that Genet is incapable of committing a murder: we know this since he has told us so in all kinds of ways; one of the favorite themes of his plays is that one cannot *become* a murderer. All this is only a dream. But this dismal and violent dream throws into relief the strange companionship of the two burglars. The enterprise—insofar as it is real—contains the elements of real friendship: even theft can serve as a bond. But hardly has the friendship dared come into being than Genet challenges it by this pompous and imaginary project of killing and being killed. He is probably distrustful of this fellow-

* For the reason Genet himself gives: that a burglar and a murderer are of two radically different species and that one does not move from the first to the second.

ship in work insofar as it may become a real relationship. Furthermore, there is a deep flaw in this complicity: since theft is destruction, the solidarity which it imposes on the accomplices slackens as the operation is carried out; no positive achievement will ever reflect to them the image of their collaboration. When a job is over, they divide a sum of money between them and their semblance of friendship is dissipated. There remains the simple coexistence of two solitudes. Similarly with all bonds between destroyers: the mechanical solidarity of adventurers and soldiers gives rise to the eternal dream of creating an indissoluble union through destruction: "The shortest path from one heart to the other is the sword," says the feudal Claudel. And Malraux expresses himself in much the same terms. Since the death which they deal unites brothers-in-arms with the enemy more closely than military comradeship unites them among themselves, each of them secretly harbors a desire to turn his arms against the others. Guy and Genet, adventurers, "soldiers of crime," are united because they play the same role at the same time: they are two embodiments of a single *"persona"* which they reflect back and forth to each other. But this *persona* is Solitude, solitude in death given and received. They look at each other, hate each other, and each is, for the other, the image of his own hatred: it is absolute separation which joins them. The great stiffened figure which each of them assumes and which he contemplates in the other is the symbol of both erection and corpselike rigidity. After that, Genet can therefore tell us that when their job is over thieves make love: homosexual love is a double murder; the Pimp stabs the girl queen and perishes in the quicksand. This double hit, this reciprocal murder which the two accomplices were meditating, was basically erotic; inversely, coitus will enact it symbolically.

But we must return to Stilitano, the fake tough. Genet is bound to him too by the identity of their *"persona."* What does this mean if not that Genet has reduced Stilitano to a pure appearance and the appearance itself to a collection of gestures? The *act* does not matter: the aim is to be. In order to be Stilitano, he must make the gestures that Stilitano makes. It would be all the easier to do so in that he has certainly borrowed them: a gesture is transmitted like a title, like a privilege: Darling—another replica of Stilitano—"keeps his shoulders hunched tight so as to resemble Sebastopol Pete, and Pete holds them like that so as to resemble Pauley the Rat, and Pauley so as to resemble Teewee, and so on." The essential characteristic of a gesture is that it has already been made. It is not

an operation that we invent as we go along: it is a unit that is already constituted, a totality that governs its parts, something like a dance step. It must not be regarded as a unique, dated event, like, for example, "the ironic and fearful attitude which Stilitano assumed that September morning," but as an already pondered, half-abstract reality which exists only by virtue of its repetition and the origin of which is lost in the mists of time, in short a rite, a tradition: what matters is not the way in which Stilitano, *that evening,* brought a blob of white spittle to his lips, but the way in which he rolled it *tirelessly* in his open mouth. Frequentatives are midway between the abstract and the concrete: this smile is, despite everything, perceived this morning, at eight o'clock, in such-and-such a light; it is a particular event. But I immediately perceive it as the reappearance *of* Stilitano's smile; I identify it as soon as it appears; I see it as the dated manifestation of a nontemporal reality, a fixed, stable quality whose essential characteristic is permanence; it is a historical fact, a unique phenomenon which exists only in its happening. When Genet runs into Stilitano again in Antwerp, he immediately *recognizes* "his way of rolling a blob of spit from one corner of his mouth to the other" as he recognizes the color of his hair or his mutilated arm. Because the gesture presents itself as "having already been," it *possesses being,* it exists per se, it characterizes a person. But precisely for that reason, precisely because it has already been thought, already been acted, it remains radically *other,* other even than the one who makes it. Genet sees it unfolding from without, and Stilitano feels it settling upon him and marking him with its stamp: but it remains as external to the latter as to the former because it is, for Stilitano who has borrowed it, *the gesture of another.* By means of the gesture, Stilitano simultaneously plays, feels, recognizes and learns what he is. And what he is is precisely *another:* "Darling will never suffer, or will always be able to get out of a tight spot by his ease in taking on the gestures of some chap he admires who happens to be in the same situation . . . thus, his desires . . . were neither the desire to be a smuggler, king, juggler, explorer or slave trader, but the desire to be one of the smugglers, one of the kings, one of the jugglers, etc., that is, as if . . ."

For the gesture is *sacred:* it is the gesture of an emperor or of a hero; I borrow it from those terrifying beings; it settles on me, tightens my consciousness, which is always a bit slack, imposes an unaccustomed rhythm upon it: it is a sacrament. "In the most woeful of postures, Darling will be able to remember that it was

also that of one of his gods . . . and his own posture will be sacred and thereby even better than merely tolerable." The gesture contains a *power.* And the greatness of this power is measured by the might of the one who first created it: "Acts have aesthetic and moral value only insofar as those who perform them are endowed with power. . . . This power is delegated to us sufficiently for us to feel it within us, and this is what enables us to bear our having to lower our head in order to step into a car, because at the moment that we lower it an imperceptible memory makes of us a movie star or a king or a vagrant (but he too is a king) who lowered his head in the same way (we saw him in the street or on the screen). . . . Priests who repeat symbolic gestures feel themselves imbued with the virtue not of the symbol but of the first executant." The gesture is thus a ritualistic and sacralizing communion with the ancestor of the clan or the eponymous hero. Its value is no longer due to its own content but to the rank and virtues of the first executant. Insofar as it is a repeated event, it is a religious ceremony; insofar as it is, in its synthetic unity, an organized being, it is a replica. In slipping into my muscles it retains the stamp of its origin; in fact it instills within me the person of its first executant which is transcendent in immanence; an imperceptible distance separates it from my consciousness, and this perspective enables me to revere within me the eminent presence of the emperor or of the king of the smugglers; but it is at the same time myself and it is I whom I respect in it.

Humble and lost in the crowd, Genet sees the star stepping into the auto, surrounded by universal respect. What the star *is* matters little; she is only her gestures. But what counts is that she *is really a star,* and this means, in any case, that the others recognize that she has the attributes of a star (rich clothing, fine car, money, royal beauty) and that they authenticate, by their reverence, the gestures which she performs. The original power of sacralization comes from the community and has its own law; if it settles upon objects, it does so by virtue of this law rather than with the aim of consecrating their value: "I wonder why Death, film stars, traveling virtuosos, queens in exile, banished kings, have a body, a face and hands. Their fascination lies in something other than a human charm, and without disappointing the enthusiasm of the peasants who wanted to catch a glimpse of her at the door of her train, Sarah Bernhardt could have appeared in the form of a little matchbox." The mirror is unimportant: its worshipers kneel before the reflection of their collective power. And since the embodiment of

these powers can be anyone at all, any gesture whatever will, provided it emanates from this embodiment, partake of its sacred nature. "The sacred surrounds us and subdues us; it is the submission of flesh to flesh." Finally, the gesture is only the king's or the star's body *acting;* that "luminous" personality, which is a simple condensation of great social forces, slips into it. The gesture is the act *become object.* The consciousness which produced the action, which invented its successive moments and bound them together by the synthetic activity of the "I think," becomes a magical unit, an objective soul, an entelechy of that organism. And, in incorporating itself into this *act-object,* the respect of the crowd confers mana upon it. If we want to steal the star's or emperor's mana, we must steal his gestures. If Genet draws himself up in his cell and makes a royal sign with his hand, a diffused respect immediately surrounds him; the cell becomes a crowd, the walls have ears and eyes.

What, then, could prevent him from *becoming* Stilitano? Since we are merely playing at what we are, we are whatever we can play at, man, animal, plant, even mineral. Genet is very serious in making Green Eyes say: "I tried to be a dog, a cat, a horse, a tiger, a table, a stone! I even tried, me too, to be a rose! . . . I did what I could. I squirmed and twisted. People thought I had convulsions." This is not surprising: the being of the animal is its movement; if I make an animal movement, I too shall be an animal. Genet's poetic world is an indefinite exchange of forms and gestures, a crisscross of transmutations, because everything has been reduced to the gesture and because the inner substance of the gesture is the gaze of others. Genet *is* in all his characters, and they are by turns a rose, a dog, a cat, a clematis. He makes himself all of man and all of nature. Since all has been denied him, he tastes of everything by means of gesture: the abjection of the tramp and imperial pride alike. The gesture is a "spiritual exercise." Humiliated, undressed, inspected, Darling "could divine the soul of a bum." Naturally this unimaginative pimp "hardly paid any attention to these momentary exchanges of souls. He never knew why, after certain shocks, he was surprised to find himself back in his skin." Genet knows why. Genet systematically experiences all evil souls. He uses gestures as instruments of prospecting. He has informed us of his method: "I take gestures chosen from young men passing by. At times, it's a French soldier, an American, a hoodlum, a bartender. . . . They suddenly offer me a gesture which can be only Erik's. I shall take note of it. . . . *I sometimes try to imitate the discovered*

*gesture. I note the state that it makes me know.*" No doubt he is only momentarily a beggar, a fallen queen, a ship's ensign. But there are only momentary souls. The one that remains longest or that recurs most often we call *our* soul, and we are surprised to find it again after a long journey. Proust, too, experienced the surprise that Genet cultivates and that Darling tries to ignore, and he often wondered how, "after deep slumber . . . seeking one's mind, one's personality, as one seeks a lost object, one ends by finding one's own self rather than any other."

Genet can say: "I am Stilitano" as Emily Brontë's hero said: "I am Heathcliff." He is Stilitano as much as is Stilitano himself, since the one seeks to appropriate by amorous practices the ideal hero whom the other is attempting to copy in his bearing. They exchange gestures. Genet and Stilitano are two madmen who both think they are Stilitano. "Stilitano would subtly insinuate himself into me, he would fill out my muscles, loosen my gait, thicken my gestures, almost color me. He was in action. I felt, in my footsteps on the sidewalk, his crocodile leather shoes creaking with the weight of the ponderous body of that monarch of the slums."

Reduced to indefinite repetition of gestures already performed, this ceremonious love has no history. It was stereotyped at the first meeting. Which of the two could act on the other, since they are only *one* and since this *one,* this ideal Stilitano, is only a sum of traditions and rites that are to be copied without anything's being changed? The most formalistic of religions is not so finicky. These immutable gestures leave no trace: another gesture takes their place and the soul receives another stamp. The soul will remain, afterward, what it was before: a soft wax, able to receive all imprints. "During those years of softness," Genet will write later, "when my personality took on all kinds of forms, any male could press my flanks with his walls, could contain me. My moral substance (and my physical substance, too, which is its visible form, with my white skin, weak bones, flabby muscles, with the slowness of my gestures and their indecisiveness) was without sharpness, without contour. I aspired at the time to being embraced by the calm, splendid statue of a man of stone with sharp angles. And I felt that peace only if I could completely take over his qualities and virtues, when I imagined I was he, when I made his gestures, uttered his words, when I was he." We know the mechanism: being another for himself, he aspires to become Another in order to feel from within, as another and as himself, the Other that he is. But for that very reason his love is not *lived,* he *does not change.* When Genet is in

love, he is not transformed. Nothing marks him. His greatest passion is reduced to his contracting a few idiosyncrasies of which another passion will rid him.

Stilitano wearies of his companion and drops him. This is an event. Is Genet going to experience the kind of love pangs that change a character, a destiny? No: there are no more ends in his life than beginnings, no more breakups than encounters. It is true that Stilitano has thrown him over. But that means for Genet that he is now the sole holder of his role. He takes away with him the *"persona"* of the Tough whom they both played. "It was no longer even his memory that I carried away with me but rather the idea of a fabulous creature, the origin and pretext of all my desires, terrifying and gentle, remote and close to the point of containing me, for, now being something dreamed, he had, though hard and brutal, the gaseous insubstantiality of certain nebulae, their gigantic dimensions, their brilliance in the heavens and their name as well. I trampled Stilitano beneath my feet as he lay battered by sun and fatigue; the dust I raised was his impalpable substance, while my burning eyes tried to make out the most precious details of an image of him that was more human and equally inaccessible." At times, it is a metaphysical virtue that can define, at Genet's will, one or another region of the universe: the sun is Stilitano as the plants and animals of the forest are bears for the clan of the bear. "The coming of the sun excited me. I worshiped it. A kind of sly intimacy developed between us . . . this star became my god. It was within my body that it rose, that it continued its curve and completed it. If I saw it in the sky of the astronomers, it was because it was the bold projection there of the one I preserved within myself. Perhaps I even confused it in some obscure way with the vanished Stilitano." If Poland is a wounded boy, why may not the dust of Spain be a dismal Pimp? When the performer is absent, things make his gestures: the sun rises, inevitably and ritually, as the Pimp suddenly draws himself up in a bar. As times goes by, Stilitano's essence is cleansed of its impurities and again becomes an Idea. It still keeps his name, for a time: "My adventure with Stilitano retreated in my mind. He himself dwindled. All that remained of him was a gleaming point, of marvelous purity. . . . The only thing about him which retained any meaning for me was the manly qualities and gestures that I knew were his. Frozen, fixed forever in the past, they composed a solid object, indestructible since it had been achieved by those few unforgettable details." The details have vanished; there remains a type; Stilitano, like "the sage" or "the

saint," enters the realm of the exemplary: "Within myself I pursued what I thought Stilitano had indicated to me." But what remains of the handsome hoodlum at this degree of schematization? Genet could just as well never have known him and have started musing over the linking of a name and a photograph as he mused over the naval officer and traitor Marc Aubert, of whose existence he learned from newspapers at about the same time. Stilitano, Marc Aubert: he met the one, he imagines the other, but both will serve him alike as guides and intercessors. The photo of the latter, cut out of a newspaper, and the abstract memory of the former will settle together on new "Big Shots," on Java, for example, the latest of Genet's friends, whose "muscle-bound, slightly swaying walk, as if he were cleaving the wind," evokes that of the Barcelona hoodlum, while "his face strangely resembles that of Marc Aubert." Rather than be of use to him in interpreting the real, these two patterns mask it from him, help him *not to see* the true Java. Finally, the Stilitano "idea," which is embodied for a moment by Stilitano himself and then by a series of good-looking boys, re-enters Genet: "Pretexts for my iridescence, then for my transparence, and finally for my absence, the lads I speak of evaporate. All that remains of them is what remains of me: I exist only through them, who are nothing, existing only through me. They shed light on me, but I am the zone of interference. These boys: my Twilight Guard."

And when Genet, with his usual lucidity, later reflects on his past, he will end by plunging the "boys" into a bath of sulfuric acid. They will no longer exist, they will be reduced to the absolute anonymity of "object X," a pure, abstract support of the "erotic situation": "Thus I realize that I have sought only situations charged with erotic intentions. That, among other things, is what directed my life. I know that there exist adventures the heroes and details of which are erotic. It is these that I have wanted to live."

The circle is completed: having taken leave of himself, Genet returns to himself. Meanwhile he has been through a whole love affair, and what remains of it? Not even a *real* memory. Has he even loved? Thrown into the company of ruffians who despise him, he seeks a friendly look and discovers their indifference: what he feels matters to no one; he is subdued by force and threats when he asks only to give himself. He can love if he wishes, but he will get nothing out of the experience, it will be a pure loss. He accepts the challenge and decides to love *for himself alone.* But it is the appeal of the Other that makes the reality of love. We are drawn, then held, by the promise of parted lips, by the expectation that we

read in the other's eyes. In order to be able to love a voice, a face, we must feel that they are calling out for love; hence, the beauty that we ascribe to them is not likely to be a lie: it is a real gift, and the beloved, who feeds on it, draws new confidence from it, is beautified by joy. In order to be completely true, a love must be shared; it is a joint undertaking in which the feeling of each is the substance of that of the other. Each of the two freedoms addresses the other, captivates it, tempts it; each of the freedoms becomes the unfathomable depth of the other; it is the other's love of me that is the truth of my love: if my passion is solitary it becomes a cult or a phantasmagoria. Genet, who is doomed to solitude, wants to live in solitude the amorous passion which is an absolute relationship between persons. He assumes the only kind of love that has been left to him, which is masturbatory. He wants his tenderness to be impotent, contained, without reciprocity, without hope; he wants it not to be betrayed by any visible sign; and since the beloved has nothing to do with it, he wants it to be so light that the other does not even feel it touching him.* Since love finds its truth in the other's gaze, since the indifference of the beloved makes love imaginary, Genet, in his zealous will to realism, compels himself to will this indifference; he requires that the icy gaze of Stilitano or Armand abolish the feeling in which he is completely involved; the ardor that consumes him is, objectively, *nothing:* a painful emptiness; Genet's absolute realism derealizes his tenderness. His loves are figments of the imagination.

Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five Genet's life is amazingly full: he is apprenticed, runs away, is caught; placed in a bourgeois family, he robs his foster parents, he is sent to Mettray, he escapes again, he begs, wanders all over France, joins the Foreign Legion, deserts, flees to Barcelona, lives by begging and prostitution in the Barrio Chino, steals again, leaves Spain and goes everywhere, to Italy, to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, stealing as he goes and sneaking across borders; his adventures would furnish material for twenty picaresque novels; he loves, is jealous, is disdained or enslaved, is unhappy. Yet nothing marks him and nothing changes him; he finds himself at the age of twenty-five as he was at fifteen. Mircéa Eliade tells us that in archaic and traditionalist ontology "*reality* is acquired exclusively by *repetition* or *participation;* whatever does not have an exemplary model is 'devoid of sense,' that is,

* "If only I could cover those pale cheeks with kisses and you not feel it" *(The Red and the Black).*

lacks reality . . . the man of traditional cultures recognizes himself as being real only insofar as he ceases to be himself . . . and is content with *imitating* and *repeating* the gestures of another. In other words, he recognizes himself as being real, that is, as 'truly himself' only insofar as he ceases precisely to be so."* He shows us archaic humanity "defending itself as best it can against whatever is *new* and *irreversible* in history." And he adds, further on, that "in conferring a cyclical direction upon time the primitive annuls its irreversibility. . . . The past is only the prefiguration of the future. No event is irreversible and no transformation definitive. In a certain sense, one can even say that nothing new occurs in the world, for all is only repetition of the same primordial archetypes; in actualizing the mythical moment in which the archetypal gesture was revealed, this repetition continually maintains the world in the same auroral instant of the beginnings."

These remarks apply to Genet word for word: entirely taken up with reliving ceremoniously his original crisis, concerned solely with repeating and imitating the archetypal gestures of others, disdainful of profane time and deigning to know only the sacred time of eternal recurrence, this adolescent is not *historical.* He refuses irreversibility, change, the new: he has become a rigorously constructed and almost autonomous system that turns round and round and that is self-operating. There is nothing surprising in this: the monster was fabricated in the country, within a traditionalist and archaic culture, and his strange religion reflects the "primitive" mentality of property owners.

Does this mean that nothing takes place within him? Quite the contrary. But the sequence of his states, the succession of his feelings and acts of will, is *circular.* The two dialectics that control his inner life run counter to each other, they jam, and finally they get twisted and whirl about idly. We have set forth separately the two movements which lead Genet to homosexuality and Saintliness. The synthetic description which we have undertaken must now show them in their reciprocal action.

## 5. *The Whirligigs*

"Jean Genet, the weakest of all and the strongest." The kind of sentence that one reads casually and that the hasty reader imagines he has understood. What does it mean? That Jean Genet, in certain

* Mircéa Eliade: *The Myth of the Eternal Return.*

respects the weakest, is the strongest in other respects? But he has made no restriction: it is in all respects simultaneously that he claims to be both. Are we to believe that he is weak *in appearance* but strong *in reality?* That would be only a trivial truth, and we know Genet well enough to know that he is not concerned with stating—paradoxically or not—truths easily digested by a good citizen's stomach: he detests truth as he does all forms of Being; although he consents to using Reason for the purpose of engraving his fallacies, he has no intention of obeying it. No: it is *simultaneously and in all respects* that he claims to be the strongest and the weakest, in appearance and in reality. He refers to two opposing systems of values and refuses to choose one or the other. In the first, the Pimp is destiny, pure Evil in its glamorous appearance; Genet is nothing but a dissolute hoodlum, just about good enough to be the slave of a rigorous master. In the second, Jean Genet, a cold, lucid consciousness, chains the criminal by his words, by his charms, leads him to destruction by honeyed betrayals. But each system implies the other: if the criminal is only a robot, what pleasure will there be in maneuvering him? He must retain all of his superiority over the female Saint so that the latter, in duping him, acquires merits. Inversely, when the Pimp rides roughshod over her, the Saint must be conscious that she is of greater worth than that which crushes her: in order that Evil be perfect and justice entire, the best must be subjected to the worst. Thus, the Saint will be superior in her inferiority to the criminal who subjects her to his whims, as St. Blandine is superior to the torturers who kill her and as the criminal who is reduced to impotence will be superior to the saint who betrays him, as the blinded Samson is superior to Delilah. Each of the two, when he falls to the lowest depths, is raised above the other; each of the two turns against the other and thereby lowers himself below the other; each figures in the other's system and Genet upholds both systems at the same time. Jean Genet, the strongest and the weakest: the strongest of all when he is the weakest, the weakest when he is the strongest. He will enjoy the double pleasure of sadism and masochism, not in the alternating or composite form that psychoanalysts call sado-masochism, but simultaneously. His sadism is the secret dimension of his masochism and vice versa.

This sentence is typical of his way of thinking: he does not write it *in spite* of the contradiction it contains but *because* of it. Far from dreaming of concealing this contradiction, of transcending it toward some synthesis or other, he experiences keen satisfaction in

making it sparkle in the false unity of the Word. Thus, he thinks falsely. Does that surprise anyone? Did anyone expect to find wisdom, justice and peace in that faked soul? Wanting to live the impossibility of living, he must want to think the impossibility of thinking. And since he discovers within himself the movement of two dialectics, he must at every moment take his bearings according to both at the same time. As an object among objects, he compares himself to other objects, in accordance with objective criteria: this vision of the world is a kind of neorealism; insofar as he is an absolute subject, objects exist only by virtue of his becoming conscious of them: this is a kind of idealism that is very likely to turn into solipsism. If he wants to survive, Genet must affirm simultaneously his neorealism and his solipsism, must pose at the same time the superiority of the object to the subject and that of the subject to the object. He is all and he is nothing, zero and infinity at the same time; the zero is in the depths of the infinite, the infinite is concealed in the zero. He has chosen to *will to be;* willing inclines him to activism, being to quietism. His undertaking will therefore be an activistic quietism or a quietistic activism or both at the same time. At the height of his willing-to-be he makes himself a receptive passivity; in the depths of his abandon to the other, we have seen him tighten and grow taut. The more he is made an object, the more he is a demanding subject; and the more completely he identifies himself with some archetype—Stilitano or Harcamone—the more he is himself. With the corrosive cynicism of homosexuals, he reduces reality to appearance and act to gesture: a man is nothing but a collection of gestures; the gestures alight where they will and transcend the agent who performs them as they do the witness who observes them. But, in the other system, these gestures must preserve their sacred value; otherwise, the Saint will cease to hope that God will descend into her. In Genet, as in all homosexuals, cynicism is accompanied by what he calls "enchantment"; the power of illusion and disenchantment coexist. The handsome Pimp is nothing but a gesture, but by virtue of the gesture an exemplary personality descends into each of us. Reality is only an appearance, but the appearance reveals the superreality.

Another would perhaps have resigned himself to being only the inert point of application of two divergent forces. But Genet wants to assume everything: it is not sufficient for him to want both dialectics; he must also want their simultaneity. And even that is not enough: one might imagine that he assumes his inner conflicts out of a kind of humanism, because human reality is dramatic, be-

cause mental suffering is the lot of every consciousness. But that would again be to submit; and besides, Genet's ethic is *inhumanism.* It matters little to him that others are at grips with such antinomies. He will live the conflict *as a unity;* his will will pose the incompatibility of the two theses and will decide in sovereign fashion that they constitute a fundamental unity. Do you say that that is impossible? But the fact is that Genet wants to think only the impossibility of thinking. To conceive by violence an idea one knows to be inconceivable—that is what defines radical Evil *in thinking.* There is, indeed, a parallelism of moral Evil and error. In the domain of knowledge, the impossibility of Evil finds an exact replica in the impossibility of deceiving oneself knowingly. As I have shown, the evildoer must know Good and must love it so that he can be more guilty; in like manner, if he reasons, he must know the True and must know that he knows it: only in that way will his error be inexcusable; far from being due to ignorance or haste, it will issue from lucid deliberation and from an enlightened will. The adolescent has devised for his personal use a logic of falsehood, that is, a technique for the nonsynthetic unification of contradictory propositions. Now, one has only to reflect for a moment to realize that this unification—since it is impossible—can be given only as a limit: it appears only at the end of a movement. And this movement cannot be a progression, for the only possible progress would necessarily be the synthesis of opposites: when two points of view are in opposition, discussion advances only if one sees a possibility of reconciling them. In Genet, the movement of thinking can be only *circular.* In Hegel, the thesis moves into the antithesis. But that in itself is already the synthesis. If the synthesis cannot be achieved—and in Genet it is a matter of uniting two dialectics rather than two terms—then the antithesis will move back into the thesis and so on ad infinitum. Genet arranges his oppositions in such a way that each term, without ceasing to exclude the other, remains in the background when the other is present. It suffices that he affirm one of the theses to discover suddenly that he is in the process of affirming the other. The *yea* is the sworn enemy of the *nay;* but in Genet's aporias no sooner has one said *yea* than the *yea* half-opens: we realize that we are saying *nay.* But we cannot adhere to this *nay* either, for it immediately tips us into the *yea;* and so on. Of course, there is never any progress, for the *yea* and the *nay* are always their own selves. The model of this circular sophistry is furnished by ancient skepticism. It is the argument of Epimenides: "Epimenides says that Cretans are liars.

But he is a Cretan. Therefore he lies. Therefore Cretans are not liars. Therefore he speaks the truth. Therefore Cretans are liars. Therefore he lies," etc. Truth leads to the lie and vice versa. Impossible to stop the round.*

The mind that enters one of these vicious circles goes round and round, unable to stop. With practice, Genet has managed to transmit to his thought an increasingly rapid circular movement. He has a vision of an infinitely rapid rotation which merges the two opposites, just as, when a multicolored disk is spun quickly enough, the colors of the rainbow interpenetrate and produce white. I have called these devices *whirligigs:* Genet constructs them by the hundred. They become his favorite mode of thinking. Ideas well up in him like small local whirlpools; the more rapid the movement, the more intense the thinking seems to be: the diabolical equivalent of a true idea is an error that one cannot shake off. He knows that the sudden flashes which dazzle him have only the momentary appearance of illumination, that they are pure impressions of speed, the effects of the purely aesthetic admiration into which we are plunged by a well-constructed sophism. But that is what he wants. His love of independence is such that he cannot even bear the gentle constraint of the evident: he tolerates only semblance-evidence, for it is he, he alone, who decrees by sovereign order that these semblances have convinced him. Genet applies himself to disordering reason as does Rimbaud to disordering the senses. He takes pleasure, out of resentment, in jeopardizing the thought of the Just; out of love of risk, in plunging into an adventure which in all probability will lead him astray; out of masochism, in settling into error; out of pride, in producing ideas that no one can share, in setting himself above logic in the royal solitude of the sophism;

* Don't shrug. For the argument of Epimenides could just as well be called the Kravchenko argument. In connection with the lawsuit that the latter brought against *Lettres Françaises,* his non-Communist opponents declared: "Kravchenko says that the methods of the Soviet government are abominable. But he was part of that government for a long time. Therefore he applied its methods. He is therefore abominable himself. And what faith can one have in the statements of an abominable man?" Kravchenko's supporters replied: "Let us admit that he is abominable for having applied Soviet methods for a long time, which means that they *are* abominable." Answer: "You admit that he is abominable. But perhaps he became so long before entering the government; perhaps he always was abominable. In that case, what is his testimony worth?" Answer: "If it was not his severity as an administrator that made him abominable, who can prove that he is?" Answer: "How, without being abominable, could he have been part of that iniquitous regime, if only for a single day?" etc. In other words: "Kravchenko says that Soviet methods are abominable. But he applied them. Therefore he is abominable. Therefore one cannot have faith in him. Therefore Soviet methods are perhaps not abominable. Therefore Kravchenko is not abominable. Therefore one can trust him. Therefore . . ." etc.

out of malignancy, in attempting to unite irreconcilables, to think *against nature,* in almost convincing himself that he succeeds in doing so—almost, not quite, for he wants to preserve, within his triumph, the irritating pleasure of failure. He knowingly engages in false reasoning so as to be able to ponder Evil and because error is an Evil. His true wickedness lies in this ineffectual zeal; it has a name: perversity.

It would be tedious to list these contraptions. But if we wish at least to know the patterns underlying their construction, we need only take the two tables of categories which we established above: as they correspond to each other, term for term, we have only to introduce each pair of opposites into a false circular unity.

### GENERAL PRINCIPLE

*If you affirm being, you find yourself in the process of affirming nothingness, but in this movement of affirmation you transcend nothingness and find yourself in the process of affirming being,* etc.

It is understood that Genet is not concerned with reducing the objective essence of being to that of nothingness. Hegel, who studies objective structures, can show that pure being, that is, being without any determination, moves into nonbeing. But Genet cares nothing about the structures of the object. What interests him is the subject. He maintains the absolute heterogeneity of nothingness and of being qua *realities;* what he wants to show is that the will, as a subjective phenomenon, is forced to affirm the one when it wants to affirm the other.

What is the meaning of the sophism? That Genet wants *to be* his being. But his being is wickedness. He therefore wants *to be* wicked. But what does the wicked person want? The destruction of all and of himself. The being that he wants to be is a will to nonbeing which annihilates itself. Wanting being, he wants nothingness. But this nothingness, on the other hand, is a being, since the evildoer possesses an objective essence which is evident to everyone. Thus, it will want such-and-such destruction in the world or in itself in order *to be* the evildoer. And since it is in the most perverse acts that the evildoer will coincide most perfectly with his essence, it is at the moment when he will blow up the world and himself that Genet will attain, in absolute annihilation, fullness of being.

In accordance with this general pattern he will construct some whirligigs of lesser importance. Here are a few:

A.—Genet wills all reality (since he wills *"to be* what crime made of him" in the world as it *is*). He therefore wills *all being.* And since he wills his relationship to the world, he wills his exile: since the world rejects him, casts him into the nonworld, he wills this rejection, he wills his being *im-monde,** which amounts to rejecting the world fiercely, to meditating on his destruction of it. Thus, the resolute decision to accept being as it is is immediately transformed into a decision to reject all being and to destroy it. But, at the same time, to reject the world which rejects him is to accept all, that is, to love and to will being, including the sentence of exile that being issues against him. Thus, the resolute will to *realism* is converted into a frenzied eagerness to destroy, but the eagerness to destroy is converted into an ecstatic acceptance of the miracle of horror. To will the world is to will to destroy it; to destroy the world is to accept destiny.

B.—Genet wants his life to be ruined, to be a failure, he wants "to drain the cup to the dregs." He therefore wills his failure. But if failure is achieved as failure, it is a success, since that is what Genet wanted. No, it is a failure; it was, after all, necessary that Genet first throw himself into an undertaking; otherwise there would be a failure of nothing. Wanting a certain result, Genet fails, and willing his failure, succeeds. He wills what he does not want and does not will what he wants.

To will his being is, for him, to will nothingness. Therefore, to attempt to coincide with the fullness of his being is to try to attain "the impossible nullity." But, inversely, the rigorous asceticism which he practices, the successive amputations which he inflicts on himself, cause him (in bringing him little by little closer to the animal, to protoplasm, and then to absolute nonbeing) progressively to attain saintliness, that is, pure being. But what is Genet's saintliness if not, by his own avowal, a word and gestures? And are not these gestures a caricature of true Saintliness? Replacing humility by abjection, and destitution by betrayal, does he not sink more deeply into Evil in presenting, by means of blasphemous mockery, a diabolical image of the supreme Morality? Have we attained absolute nonbeing? The absolute of Evil? No, for in flouting the Saintliness which he has not ceased to cherish since childhood, Genet effects a last renunciation: he becomes he who no longer

* *Immonde:* unclean, foul. In hyphenating the word, the author is playing on its etymology: *im* (not) *monde* (world), that is, not of the world.—Translator's note.

even believes in Saintliness, who has lost all hope. Thus, it is at the moment of this last sacrifice that this martyrized consciousness changes into a saintly consciousness for the absolute gaze which perceives it from on high. But no, that's just one more piece of humbug, a cheap trick, Saintliness does not exist, one does evil for evil's sake, etc. Although the whirligig is rather rapid, Genet can enjoy simultaneously—or almost—the bitter, desperate pleasure of flouting Saintliness itself and the mystical ecstasy of the Saint who feels he is being rewarded.

### THE CATEGORIES: THE HERO AND THE SAINT*

We have seen them caught up in an eternal round, now at the top, now at the bottom of the wheel, both higher and lower than each other.

### THE CRIMINAL AND THE TRAITOR

*Thesis:* The criminal does absolute Evil, objective evil. The traitor is his parasite. Hence, betrayal is only a secondary and derivative evil.

*Antithesis:* But as Evil is by nature parasitic, Betrayal, which is a parasite of a parasite, is the supreme Evil; it eats away the modicum of force and order, hence of being, that still remains in crime. The criminal is only the traitor's *means:* he is-in-order-to-be betrayed.

*Return to the thesis:* But in order for betrayal to be loathsome it must destroy effortlessly and in a cowardly manner what is superior to it; it must be "the grain of sand in Cromwell's bladder," the silly accident that trips up the hero. It will therefore be all the more dreadful in that the traitor is inferior to the criminal. Hence, it is the Crime which is the sacred outrage, which is Evil par excellence, etc.

### THE ACTIVE HOMOSEXUAL and THE PASSIVE HOMOSEXUAL

*(essential which moves to the inessential)* *(inessential which moves to the essential)*

*Thesis:* The active homosexual is the beloved, hence the essential. He subjugates the lover, he possesses him. *Transition to the*

* *La Sainte:* female saint.—Translator's note.

*antithesis:* But he derives his poignant beauty from the love that the girl queen bears him. Without her he would be merely a brute. The passive homosexual possesses him in turn: Genet possesses Stilitano because he installs him within himself; Divine possesses Darling because she infects him with her poetry. Thus, it is the passive homosexual who is the essential. *Return to the thesis:* But if the Pimp were not *really* glamorous, the beloved's consciousness, empty and liberated, would again be face to face with itself and its wretchedness. The beloved again becomes the inessential, the archetype that enables the lover to attain the sacred, etc.

### THE EVIL OF CONSCIOUSNESS and CONSCIOUSNESS IN EVIL

(*being*) (*nothingness*)

*Thesis:* For Genet's optimism, Mind, Knowledge and Self-Awareness are the supreme good. Hence, the worst Evil is death and immediately afterward comes the Evil-that-eats-away-at-consciousness, that is, madness, stultification, fury, ignorance. The greatest of evils is the *degradation* of the human creature. But no—*Antithesis:* The madman is excused by reason of his madness, the ignorant and the idiot are only half responsible. The worst Evil is the lucid, perspicacious consciousness that does Evil with premeditation. *Return to the thesis:* Deliberate, contrived Evil calls for intelligence, tact, knowledge: and these are good. Indeed, it is the leprosy that eats away at consciousness, it is the hereditary taint, it is alcoholism that must be regarded as the supreme Evil. No, for . . . etc.

### THE OBJECT AND THE SUBJECT
### THE OTHER AND ONE'S SELF

*Thesis:* To be oneself is to be the Other. *Antithesis:* The Other vanishes, the self remains. *Return to the thesis:* This self is no longer anything *for itself,* for it was not aware of itself qua Other; it is again alienated in the other. In other words: Genet is first an object amidst objects that crush him. He frees himself and transforms the objects into appearances. He is a pure and empty subject. But this subject is seen by Another, a God who places himself at the back of his consciousness. It is thus Genet's very consciousness that changes into appearance. Perhaps it is only a nightmare of this evil God. Henceforth the objects of this consciousness have as much truth as the consciousness itself; they no longer depend on the light

it sheds on them but on the God who sees them through it. They even have for the former a truth which they do not have for the latter. It is the consciousness which becomes relative, and objects regain their absolute density. Genet, an object among objects, becomes a consciousness surrounded by appearances; then, this consciousness changes into an appearance surrounded by real things. Of course, it does so in order to eat away at them again, and so on.

These whirligigs forcibly unite two dialectics which become entangled and draw each other into a circular movement: in each of them, the thesis represents being, the positive, death; the antithesis is the negative, freedom, consciousness and life. Freedom corrodes and dissolves pure being and is again alienated in all being; the thesis is the transcendent, the sacred; the antithesis is immanence. The thesis is mystical alienation and rejection of the human, the antithesis shadows forth a grim humanism. In short, thesis and antithesis represent the two moments of freedom. But these two segments, instead of merging in a harmonious synthesis (to deny the false *in order* to affirm the true, to destroy *in order* to build), remain mutilated and abstract and perpetuate their opposition. The *positive* moment remains what it is among the Just: conformism, blind submission; the *negative* moment remains the bloody half that the Just man tears from himself and projects upon the Other: pure negativity, negation of all. Submission to the "All-Evil," destruction of all: Genet moves continually from one to the other of these *absolute* attitudes. All or Nothing; he is not in a position to accept *something,* to refuse *something,* to invent *something.* Unable to station his individuality in the real by means of acts, he lets his Self roll away from him.

This adolescent has shut himself up in a veritably paranoiac system: he no longer sees himself or the universe except through little local maelstroms. Experience brings him nothing: at best it sets these automatisms going. His thinking becomes less and less communicable and he knows it: he is delighted to be the only one who has the key to it. Stilitano has already begun to look at him with surprise: "You nuts or something?" No, he is not nuts, at least not yet, but he now speaks only to himself, he makes conniving signs to himself above the head of the person he is talking to. He spins about more and more quickly: at times it seems to him that he has succeeded in embracing all contradictions in a single view. And then, no: he has to keep spinning: "Was it true that philosophers doubted the existence of things in back of them? How is one

to detect the secret of the disappearance of things? By turning around very fast? No. But even faster? Faster than anything? I shot a look behind me. I spied, I turned my eyes and head, ready to . . . No, it was no use. Those things are never caught napping. You would have to wheel about with the speed of an airplane. You would then realize that the things have disappeared and yourself with them."* Meanwhile, he loses sight of his chief goal: he wanted to become an exemplary personality, the prophet of an inhuman religion. But his decision to become a saint prevents him from going on to crime, and his fondness for Evil-as-object prevents him from attaining Saintliness. Where are the great betrayals that he was to have committed? The great sufferings he was to have inflicted on himself? Without a history and without efficacy, he goes round in circles *in his life too:* he steals a little—very little—he begs, scrounges, prostitutes himself; he submits to some brute or other who subjects him to his pleasure; he gives way in the presence of force and takes revenge by petty betrayals that he never quite carries through, for fear of reprisals; kicked out or dropped, he starts stealing or begging again, comes under the thumb of another tyrant. He goes elsewhere and it is still the same place, he changes master and it is still the same master; his behavior starts to become stereotyped; he grows accustomed to Evil, to Misfortune; he repeats himself, imitates himself; he grows ossified. Nothing more can happen to him since everything is already decided, by others and by himself: at every instant he lives his destiny in its entirety, and each time his thinking covers the same monotonous circuit; the die is cast. Perhaps some day the adolescent will awaken: he will go to a mirror and see the image of an old, faded fairy. That is Genet's terror, the only human feeling he has left. Divine, that extraordinary character, will one day be born of this fear of aging. We are still far from that point: Genet does not even imagine that he may some day write. He has locked himself, beyond appeal, into that circular prison. At times he calls it a tomb.

### THE LAST CONTRADICTION: DREAM AND REALITY

And yet, something is changing: that disk which is turning faster and faster is in the process of taking off from the real. Without a

* Compare, in the case of another writer who is "accused," namely Cocteau, the obsession with speed ("Everything is a question of speed"), circular speed (ventilator, etc.), and the image of the propeller whose speed makes it invisible and which can cut your arm off.

home, without friends, without real love, without a trade, cast out by men and their tools into a phantom Nature, condemned to think falsely, Genet, like a balloon whose moorings have been cut, leaves the earth and rises into the clouds. "For ten years," he once said to me, "I lived in a dream." What, indeed, is the glamour of Stilitano, of Armand, of Guy, what are the poetic miracle, the hostility of Nature, the gazes that hound this Cain even in solitude, what are they if not dreams? What are those spinning sophisms if not dreams of thought?

Nevertheless, he lives amidst dangers, enemies: he has to be alert, to calculate risks, to adapt himself to the unforeseen, to work out ingenious devices. This dreamer is essentially practical: could he have survived if he were not "the wiliest of hoodlums"?

Genet presents us with the strange figure of a man who dreams in the midst of action and without ceasing to act, maladjusted while fully adjusted, raving in a state of complete lucidity. He remains aware of both the true and the false, he is in control of both his acts and his reveries. But at the moment of action his reflection gives itself *false* motives; it deliberately deceives him as to the meaning of his acts, as to their purpose. In like manner, the primitive, so we are told, considers his arrows to be deadly because they have been smeared with a poisonous juice and because they were consecrated in a traditional ceremony. Genet, like the Maori, places himself simultaneously on the technical level and the magical level. And in order for the dream not to interfere with the practical outcome, reflection gives an interpretation of the act that tallies with reality: the false motives harmonize with the true, which they cover up; the false means are chosen in such a way as not to hamper the action of the true means and must even make it possible to invent practical solutions under cover of the imaginary. His reverie, instead of being *in action,* is a superaction—in the sense that one speaks of super-reality—whose complex structure presupposes both a spontaneous consciousness which interprets the real situation in the light of its real projects and a reflective consciousness which, while keeping an eye on the operations of the first, endeavors to look at reality from the viewpoint of the unreal. He splits his personality, he is torn between truth and fiction, he constructs his behavior according to two conflicting systems of interpretation and, while mobilizing his intelligence in order to attain his vital goals and to evade real dangers, he pretends to be in a state of absent-mindedness with regard to his petty preoccupations; he wants to be unaware of them and focuses his attention on the distorted image of them given by

his reflective consciousness. He practices double vision: "They said I saw double whereas I saw the double of things." Pushed into a police wagon by a cop, he "makes of the Black Maria a carriage of exile, a coach wild with grandeur, slowly fleeing, when it carried me off, between the ranks of a people bowing in respect." At the same time, he knows very well that this princely chariot in which he sees "royal misfortune" is only a vulgar Black Maria. He knows it, he *needs* to know it and yet he strives to forget it. The climate of this inner experience is *exasperation:* "Overexcitement gives rise to the magical. It is when the soul is exasperated, for example by waiting, that one is open to the unreal, to the superreal."

Only constant overexcitement, instability of mood, can beget simultaneously this will to adjustment and this will to ignorance; he makes a relentless effort to doubt the indubitable, to believe in the unbelievable, to maintain transparent phantoms in the blinding light of the obvious; he does this in order to enjoy both his power and his impotence and out of resentment toward the God who created him. Thus, reverie appears, in this odd dreamer, at the maximum of tension and willing: "I was on horseback. Even though I am very calm, I feel myself being swept by a storm which is due, perhaps, to the rapid rhythm of my thinking which stumbles over every accident, to my desires which are violent because almost always curbed, and, when I live my inner scenes, I have the impression of always living them on horseback, on a galloping horse, one that rears. I am a horseman. . . . Not that it happens in quite that way, that is, that I know I am rearing or on horseback, but rather I make the gestures and have the soul of a man who is on horseback: my hands contract, my head is high, my voice is arrogant . . . and when this feeling of riding a noble, whinnying animal overflowed into my daily life, it gave me what is called a cavalier* look and the tone and bearing which I thought victorious."

Yet even if he does convince us that these enchantments are the effect of a lucid will, we cannot help but have misgivings: is that really what he wanted at the beginning? We are familiar with his aggressive imperialism, his rejection of evasion, his will to live the impossibility of living; we have not forgotten the zeal with which little Pierrot rolled his tongue over the repulsive insect that he put into his mouth unwittingly. We are therefore astounded to hear him declare that "the nothingness of human things is such that, save for the Being Who is by Himself, nothing is beautiful but

* The French word for "horseman" is *cavalier.*—Translator's note.

that which is not." How dare he—he who dripped with blood and passion when confronted with the universe—how dare he maintain that "the land of the Chimeras is the only one worth inhabiting"? Does it mean that the traitor he wanted to become was not a *true* traitor? Were those ten years of horrible asceticism to lead to hackneyed commonplaces worthy of a Marcel Schwob or a Heredia, to this trashy, imbecilic glorification of the Ideal?

However surprised we may be, Genet is even more so. At times he even gets panicky and tries to wake up: what he says about prisoners in *Miracle of the Rose* applies above all to himself: "Prisons are full of mouths that lie. Every inmate relates fake adventures in which he plays the role of hero. But these stories are never continued to the height of splendor. Sometimes the hero cuts himself short because he feels the need for sincerity when talking to himself, and we know that when the imagination is very strong it may make us lose sight of the dangers of real life. . . . It conceals reality from him, and *I do not know whether he is afraid of falling to the depths of the imagination and becoming an imaginary being himself or whether he is afraid of clashing with the real.** But when he feels the imagination besting him, invading him, he reviews the real dangers that he is running, and, to reassure himself, states them aloud."

Like these prisoners, Genet has terrible, cynical awakenings; he exercises his power of disenchantment against his own constructions. In vain: two negations do not equal an affirmation. If the persecuted lucidity takes its revenge, it is not in order to return to reality but to intensify the disintegration. The imagination reduced the world to a sum of miraculous gestures; analytical lucidity reduces the gesture to appearance. Nothing remains of external reality. Thereupon the dreams return: since all is appearance, one might as well choose the appearances which are most flattering. And Genet again falls into wonderment before himself: where do they come from, those tenacious, parasitic reveries which prevent him from performing on himself what he called "a daily labor, long and disappointing"? He senses a mystery in broad daylight, he feels himself the victim of an indefinable mystification. Not that he *does not want* to dream: what surprises him is that he wants to. If the schizophrenic still has leisure for questioning himself, he will be frightened by the *involuntary* proliferation of his images. As for Genet, it is his will that disturbs him, for it is in his will that

* My italics.

the metamorphosis has taken place. He amused himself earlier by constructing whirligigs: it pleased him to affirm the thesis and to find himself in the process of affirming the antithesis. But this is the most dizzying of all the whirligigs, and this one Genet has not constructed. How can a will that is bent on willing all the real possibly end—*without ceasing to be in harmony with itself*—by escaping from being toward nothingness? For, after all, he had chosen to live and watch over his situation, to inspect it minutely, to make the best of it whatever it might be, and it seems to him that he has kept his word. But the sole effect of this systematic and rigorous rejection of all dreams is to transform him into a visionary, an idle dreamer. Is he to believe that the oft-repeated vow to involve himself in a realistic, positive action must necessarily lead to dreaming his acts? Was the desperate eagerness to live life as it is, without appeal and without hedging, to make of him a Utopian leading, simultaneously, several imaginary lives in invented worlds? How can the austere resolution to confront the situation end by turning its back to him? Genet wants his prison, he inspects it without respite, he is proud of it, he sees the universe as a jail. And now this model prisoner finds that he has escaped despite himself. This strange King Midas puts out his hand to touch the walls of his jail, his straw mattress, the real attributes of his abjection; everything is transformed beneath his fingers into theatrical props: the mattress is a still-life deception painted on a cardboard floor.

When a realistic will applies itself unremittingly to its object and when it finds itself, without having been diverted by an external influence, in the process of willing the opposite of what it wills, there is a fundamental contradiction in its project. It is this contradiction that must be brought to light.

Genet wants to be what crime has made of him. We have shown the duality that manifests itself in this first act of willing: Genet wants *Being*. He is going to attempt to become the maker of the faked world which takes away his right to live; he is going to strive to produce the prefabricated destiny already awaiting him. But he also wants nonbeing: since this pitiless world is crushing him, he must will this crushing to the very end; since the just have made a destroyer of him, he will annihilate the universe. To want to be what he is is both to want the world and to reject it.

Now, these two conflicting acts of will have a common characteristic which he has not perceived: they are *imaginary*. One can neither reject the world nor accept it, save in dream.

One cannot reject the world unless one destroys it or kills oneself. Genet rejects suicide. Then what is the action which will blow up the universe? I know that certain lofty spirits make a name for themselves by illustrious refusals. They say *no*. What about it? These refusals are appearances which hide a shameful but utter submission. I hate the pretense that trammels people's minds and sells us cheap nobility. To refuse is not to say no, but to modify by work. It is a mistake to think that the revolutionary refuses capitalist society outright. How could he, since he is inside it? On the contrary, he accepts it as a fact which justifies his revolutionary action. "Change the world," says Marx. "Change life," says Rimbaud. Well and good: change them if you can. That means you will accept many things in order to modify a few. Refusal assumes its true nature within action: it is the abstract moment of negativity.

There are times, however, when the situation is unacceptable and we are unable to change it. The natural course of events sometimes throws us into these deadlocks: one has only to think of airplane or mountain-climbing accidents, the victims of which died in a state of horror; burned, slashed to pieces, they could no longer even attempt to live, they felt themselves dying. But why should they have *accepted* that irremediable death when all their life had been spent in fighting against it in an effort to establish a human order; to resign themselves *in extremis* would have been to deny themselves, to betray themselves. And how could they have rejected it? Their extreme weakness made it even impossible for them to hasten it by suicide. What remained for them? Mental lockjaw, vain physical agitation, or else, for the more clear-sighted, despair, the frightful, blindingly evident fact that man is impossible. But most of the time it is other men who throw us into the rat trap like rats: and the inhuman is even more unacceptable when it comes to man through men. In 1942, a sixteen-year-old Jew, who had been imprisoned before he had even heard of the Resistance, learned one morning that he was going to be shot as a hostage. The grownups had claimed that they had fashioned a world in which he could live; in return, they had asked for his confidence and he had given it to them: it was in order to murder him. In the name of that blind confidence, of the optimism which they had inculcated in him, in the name of his youth and of his infinite projects, he *had* to rebel. But against whom? *To whom* could he appeal? To God? He was an unbeliever. Besides, even if he had believed, that would not have changed anything: God was allowing him to be killed; He was on the side of the grownups. The boy's throttled rebellion grew all the more violent in that it felt it was ineffectual: his cries, which knew

they were unheeded, enveloped a horrible silence. His refusal changed meaning. It was no longer a matter of rejecting an inevitable death, but of dying and saying no. As he was unable to bear the thought that this "no" was a mere puff of air, a breath that would be buried with him by the shovelfuls of earth that would fall on his mouth, he refused so as to compel the absolute to take over his refusal, so that the ether or some other incompressible fluid might become an eternal memory on which his revolt might be engraved forever; that "no" assured him immortality: his soul, separated from his body, would be only an immortal *no*. But the absolute is blind and deaf; we do not know the diamond that can scratch the ether; the refusal was transformed into a magical incantation, it was lived in reverse: since he had to, by virtue of his nature, address *someone,* the child refused *so that this someone might be born,* so as to give ears to the absolute. Thereby he *became imaginary:* his cries, his tears, the beating of his fists against the door, were stolen from him; he felt that an actor had been substituted for him. Then, his blood ran cold and he vaguely wondered what God of Wrath, not content with having condemned him to death, was making him die in a state of insincerity. We know that this God is man. The secret of these forced shammings lies in this: there are situations which one can only undergo, but to undergo is impossible because man is defined by his acts; when action is repressed by the world, it is internalized and derealized, it is play-acting; reduced to impotence, the agent becomes an actor. Such is precisely the case of Genet: his idle will moves into the realm of the imaginary; he becomes an actor despite himself, and his rejection of the world is only a gesture.

Will he have more luck when he attempts to assume it? But, as Alain has said: "The will has no hold outside of an action which it performs." And here there is no action to perform since there is nothing to change. Thus, one cannot will that which is. One can, of course, continue to will an act which one performed the day before because it is not finished, because it needs retouching; and besides, if one wants to survive, one must certainly adapt oneself to the inevitable, "to conquer oneself rather than fortune," to hasten at times the maturation of harmful events so as to make them occur at the least unfavorable moment. But Genet's situation was given to him as a whole and all at once: he finds in it nothing that he can delay or hasten; in short, he has nothing to will because there has never been anything that could be done about the situation: his future was stolen from him.

But what if he nevertheless persists in willing? What will happen?

At the end of the last century, history carried out a frightful and wonderfully readable experiment that is going to enlighten us: a man exhausted himself in the stupendous and vain endeavor *to will the totality of what is.* We know what happened to him.

Nietzsche *wanted to will* his moral solitude, his literary failure, the madness which he felt coming on, his partial blindness and, through his woes, the universe. Vain efforts: his will skidded over the glazed, slippery block of being without getting a hold. What could he do to will, *to have willed,* the clouds that passed over his eyes, the pounding in his head? He was on the lookout for his instinctive repulsions and as soon as he caught himself protesting, or begging for mercy, he clenched his fists, scowled and cried out: "I will it"; he was dancing the ballet of will. He also danced that of joy: since the completion of a work delights its creator's soul, he rejoiced at the history of the world in order to convince himself that it was his work, and as it ended in making him suffer every humiliation, he learned to call his tears of suffering tears of joy. If he writhed, *it could only be* with laughter; if he gasped, it was *necessarily* with pleasure. By means of the first dance he made himself, in the present, an imaginary legislator of a pre-established order; by the second, he transformed himself, in the past, into a mystical creator of increate reality. In short, he was like the fly on the wheel in La Fontaine's fable. Nevertheless, this play-acting had to be justified by a dogma: it was then that he had his famous vision at Surlej, a vision that had been anticipated, solicited, long cultivated. (He had written to Peter Gast, two years before: "I have reached the end of my thirty-fifth year. . . . It was at that age that Dante had his vision.") So at Surlej, "6,500 feet above sea level and much higher above all human things," was completed the metamorphosis of the most wildly, most bitterly realistic willing into pure poetry. There was an antinomy, since the Fiat of decision can be addressed only to what is not yet, to the possible, to being, to the real. At Surlej the antinomy was given an imaginary solution which enabled Zarathustra "to embody universal approbation, the yea, the limitless amen . . .":* "The knot of causes in which I am entwined will return—it will re-create me. I myself am one of the causes of eternal recurrence."† This taut and do-nothing will reverses the natural movement of praxis, for the act transforms the possible into reality, but Nietzsche—Nietzsche who says of himself: "My experi-

* *Ecce Homo.* Cf. also, *id.,* "There is no abyss to which I do not carry the benediction of my yea."

† *Zarathustra der Genesende.*

ence is completely unaware of what is meant by 'willing' something, 'working at it ambitiously,' aiming at a goal or at the realization of a desire. . . . I do not want a thing to become other than what it is . . . I do not want to change myself"*—dissolves the totality of being into possibility. The doctrine of Eternal Recurrence authorizes him to treat the real as a particular case of the possible (in the way the circle is said to be a particular case of the ellipse), the present as the infinitesimal instant in which the reminiscence of the past merges with the premonitory message of the future, and the present figure of Being as the finite image of infinite Nonbeing. I have explained elsewhere how the imagination seizes upon present objects in order to make contact, through them, with absent ones and how the imaginary act produces, by one and the same movement, a "presentification" of the absent and an "absentification" of the present; I have given the name *analogon* to a present object which is a prey to an absence. Thus, the Nietzschean will commits the world to phantoms, transforms the present state into an *analogon* of itself and causes it to be corroded by its own absence. We can say of someone who tends to be abstracted that "he has fits of absent-mindedness," "he is elsewhere"; inversely, Nietzsche puts *this* forest, *this* spring, *these* rocks into a state of abstractedness: they are no longer *here* and *now;* they become mirages which rise up from the future, the formal announcement of the infinite series of their reappearances. Is it the day before yesterday, today or the day after tomorrow? Since the future and the present are indiscernible, my perception prophesies, my will can fly ahead once again to that which is not yet and can *will the present as future.* The motive of all this machinery is as follows: in order to give oneself the right to will being, one must find a way of affecting it with nonbeing; the first step of absolute realism must be to derealize the real. But, it may be objected, Nietzsche has merely extended the problem, he has not eliminated it: even if present circumstances were to be repeated ad infinitum, he is forced to undergo their recurrence; the rigorous laws which govern development have nothing to do with our consent.

That is so, but you have not yet perceived the secret mechanism of the stratagem: as the real absents itself, the will's point of application is, at the same time, displaced. It is true that if this "recurrence" were to take place, it would be ineluctable, but it is also true that the present state of the system does not contain a single

* *Ecce Homo.*

sign, not the slightest beginning of a proof, not even an indication, of its later repetition. The myth of Eternal Recurrence is not in the least bit evident, and Nietzsche never bothered to furnish proof of it.* He vaguely thought, a year after his vision, of leaving for Paris or Vienna "to study the mathematical basis of Recurrence," but he very quickly dropped the plan. Moreover, as we have seen, this illumination had been in preparation for a long time, or rather he was preparing himself for it as for a sacred ceremony of initiation. In addition, the content of the vision presented no novelty for him, since, as Andler points out, he "describes in so many words the idea of Eternal Recurrence in *Vom Nutzen und Vorteil der Historie* (*W. C.*, 298)." In this work, adds Andler, he "comes to no decision as to the truth of the idea."† What was new at Surlej was that he *did* come to a decision: he *decided* that the idea was true, without proof, in a burst of enthusiasm. The myth became an article of faith, hence of will. Thus, the act of will is not found where he claims to place it; he proclaims: "I know that my pains will come back and I want them to come back." But this is the public and mendacious expression of a strictly subjective fiat: "I do not know whether they will come back, but I want to *believe* it." If he displays no zeal in demonstrating his thesis, it is not because he thinks it undemonstrable, but because he has no wish to make a theorem of it and because he does not want his ideative will to be constrained by logical necessity as his practical will is by physical necessity. He wants "to think against himself" and to maintain his faith by a free act against the supplications of a body that would like to stop suffering. Freedom, work, effort, everything is transported to the plane of belief, for it is on this plane that one rediscovers the possible: it *would be possible* that Nietzsche not believe in Eternal Recurrence. Do you say that, on the basis of his doctrine, even that is not possible, that Nietzsche's very faith is conditioned by his nature and the latter by the universe? Yes, that is what one ought to think *if one already believes* in cyclical recurrence, but in one's deep inner solitude one has a quite other experience: one realizes rather that it is *almost impossible* to maintain an opinion that does violence to spontaneous inclinations and that

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* Actually, one does find in his works *arguments* in favor of Recurrence. For example: "Whoever refuses to believe in a circular course of the universe is not far from believing in an absolute sovereign God" (*Werke*, XII, 57). And the following: "If stability were *possible*, it would have come into being" (*id.*). But these puerile and abstract arguments do not convince anyone, above all not Nietzsche. They belong to what I shall call "the ballet of argumentation."

† Andler, *Nietzsche*, IV, 226, note 2.

is based neither on intuitive evidence nor on reasoning nor on the authority of a church. At the moment when the will seems sovereign, it is again derealized because it becomes gratuitous; one must again clench one's fists, beat the walls, scowl, cry out: "I believe it. I want to believe it." In short, one must dance the ballet of faith. Nietzsche *plays at* astonishment, exaltation, joy, anguish, he writes to his friends to inform them of his vision, he will celebrate its birthday, according to his custom, in order to integrate it into his sacred time. All in vain: behind the dance is only an absence of the soul. He does not believe; he wants to believe that he believes. The entire system founders in the imaginary. At night, during his spells of insomnia, he discovers the void: "The void: no more thought; the strong passions revolving about worthless subjects; being the spectator of these absurd movements pro or con; haughty, sardonic, judging oneself coldly." But he will carry through. While multiplying himself ad infinitum in the future, he projects himself into the past; an infinity of dead phoenixes have produced the living phoenix; he is the legendary ancestor of himself. This time, the trick comes off: torn between a future and a past which are equally imaginary, the present rips apart; the attention which Nietzsche gives to the real turns into abstractedness and the presence to the world into absence; unable to produce being, the will denies it. We can at last draw a conclusion from this astonishing defeat: if one does not succeed in changing an unacceptable situation, then it makes no difference whether one wills it or rejects it, for the one who publicly rejects it comes to terms with it in secret and the one who claims to will it hates it in his heart. In both cases, there is the same leap: from being to nothingness, from the evolving to the timeless. It is in order to "make the point" that one refuses or that one determines to will: in order to book one's place in the absolute. Both attitudes are condemned; they know this and they seek failure. Failure is the immediate object of the Nietzschean will: this man who is drowning demands that the instant of his choking last forever. As for the refusal, though it assumes at first a lofty attitude toward pain and misery, in short, though it is, in the immediate present, a revolt against failure, it wants to be, on another level, a failure of revolt. The reason is that for him man's grandeur lies in his being unsatisfied. In the first case, one relentlessly wills a disaster that one assumes to be inevitable so that the man's death may be identified with the triumph of his will; in the second, the aim of the refusal is to detach the soul from being in order to shape it into a likeness of values; the failure is experienced

voluptuously as a condemnation of the world, as indirect proof that man is an angel; the man who refuses takes care not to desire a victory which, in fulfilling values, would destroy ethics; his refusal must be ineffectual, unheeded, inexpressible: the words themselves, insofar as they are involved in being, must betray him; to die refusing is to ensure one's triumph beyond defeat, it is to palm off on the absolute the order to say no. Both lines of conduct have the same principle: man is impossible. Mallarmé's old man who knows that "nothing will take place, that the excepted place may be a constellation," and who is swallowed up, bent "on not opening his clenched hand above his humble head," and Nietzsche's Zarathustra who wills his own decline and who sings: "Pain says, 'Pass,' but all joy wants eternity," are twin brothers, one a poet, the other, an actor, eager to light the same lamps in the sky.

We are now able to understand Genet's adventure. This energetic, active little man has dedicated himself to the mad undertaking of becoming what he already is and of destroying what he cannot prevent from being. Immediately his will volatilizes in the imaginary. Since it wills what cannot be willed, it is therefore dreaming that it wills it. Doomed by nature to remain ineffectual, his destruction and his approbation take place symbolically. The day he chose to will his destiny, Genet decided, unwittingly, to make himself a symbol, to express himself by symbols and to live amidst symbols.

It is true that, unlike Nietzsche, a man of independent income and free of financial worries, whose decisions were workings of the soul, Genet is constantly *active*. He has to steal in order to live. He plans a jewel theft, sets the day, the time, decides on the method, chooses his accomplices. Yes, to the very end this theft remains one of his possibilities, to the very end he can decide not to commit it. Within these narrow limits, he is free. But if he did not steal these jewels, he would steal others next week: he *is* a thief; each of his particular actions flows from the essence which it claims to constitute; he has been doomed to repetition. Since he wants to make himself what he is, all that remains for him is to dream that each burglary effects an irreparable leap into Evil, that his entire life is gathered up and determines itself in each of them. *In reality,* Genet steals because he is a thief and because he has no other means of existence; *in the imaginary,* he steals in order to become a thief. Consequently, he derealizes himself entirely, he rivets his attention on a fictive interpretation of his behavior, he becomes an actor. A performer who plays the role of Hamlet *really* sits down on a *real*

chair because the director has so decided; his gesture is therefore incorporated into the *real* course of the world and contributes to the success of a commercial undertaking, which is what a theatrical performance is, but at the same time he expresses and constitutes in the imaginary the personality of the Prince of Denmark. The action of sitting down is therefore open to a twofold interpretation: it is a movement established by the staging and it is the effect of Hamlet's despondency in the presence of his mother. In like manner, Genet's theft is, according to his own terms, *poetic* because it unfolds both in the dimension of the real and in that of the dream.

What does our thief want? To derealize himself in a character who is none other than himself. He hopes thereby, as we have seen, to *encounter* himself. To steal is to re-enact willfully the original crisis. The gaze of others once rooted him to the spot and petrified him: the others *saw in him* a thief. To will to be a thief is to wrest from the others that original intuition and to live it for himself. Forcing doors and breaking locks, Genet enters an empty house in order to find himself there, that is, in order to be struck by the lightning of the evident: he will encounter "the exterminating angel locked up in a little pansy." But *we* know that this encounter is impossible; the image that the stolen objects reflect to him is in the process of gradually disappearing. Furthermore, the concrete being of the thief is accessible only to the consciousness of Others. Genet therefore finds himself compelled to have recourse to the Others at the very moment he thought he was freeing himself from them. It is through their eyes that he must make his being be reflected to him: they once caught him by surprise despite his precautions, he will force them to catch him by surprise; he was the terrified subject of a scandal, he will cause the scandal deliberately; he will read himself in those furious eyes, in those frowns, on those faces pale with fear. But it so happens that one steals in secret, that the burglar's first concern is not to be caught. That need not be an obstacle: instead of a real audience, Genet will content himself with a *supposed* audience. Thus, the unreal is multiplied by itself. First degree of derealization: Genet plays his being for himself alone; second degree: he transforms being into appearing and plays to the gallery; third degree: since *appearing* requires that one show oneself and crime that one hide oneself, Genet, who is alone in the apartment which he is burgling, plays at stealing for a fictive audience: "During the theft, my body is exposed. I know that it is sparkling with all my gestures. The world is attentive to all my

movements, though it may want me to trip up." His slightest movement is "as brilliant as the facet of a jewel." As for the audience, it is ready to hand: it is the apartment itself. The setting and the witnesses are one and the same: here again the negative becomes the *analogon* of the imaginary positive: the real feeling that fills the burglar is the fear of being seen. This fear gives the landscape a soul. Everything is a trap. The floor is an infinity of possible creakings; the Chinese vase is the threat of a crashing fall; the curio lying innocently on a table will change into an alarm clock if it is touched. "All of this light instant is under the threat of the single, black and pitiless eye of a revolver. My precautions people the empty rooms; thousands of ears sprout from the walls; the darkness which envelops me is an infinite gaze; hands are crawling under the tables." This "scintillation" of the body is quite simply his permanent possibility of becoming an object which he experiences in the imaginary as a real presence of an audience that objectifies him.

So long as he succeeds, he keeps the spectators under the spell, he obliges them to remain imaginary, they are the captive souls of the tables, the closets, the consoles. If he botches the job, the enchantment ceases, real cops swoop down on him. But the performance will lose nothing thereby: the imaginary performer becomes a real performer. So long as he operated in solitude, the unreality of his acts was accessible only to him; it was their hidden dimension: anyone observing him from a hiding place would have seen only a diligent burglar whose precise movements conformed to the requirements of the undertaking. If the cops and the raging audience of the just should suddenly appear, the action loses its efficacy, one commits it for display, it aims at becoming glamorous; the imaginary corrodes praxis: "In order to flee from the store, one of [the burglars] had tried to plunge through the glass. By accumulating damage around his arrest, he no doubt thought he was giving it an importance one would no longer grant the fact preceding it: the burglary. He was already trying to surround his person with a bloody, astounding, intimidating pomp. . . . The criminal magnifies his exploit. He wants to disappear amid great display, in an enormous setting brought on by destiny."

Cain is a dreamer. The dream takes everything, eats everything, including the will to remain awake. A dreamer in spite of himself? A willful dreamer? Both, and at the same time. He wanted to assume his entire condition, to carry the world on his shoulders and to become, in defiance of all, what all have made of him: this proud

endeavor was bound to flow into the imaginary; the others had won in advance: they were maneuvering him while he was dreaming his acts. This marionette pretends not to feel the string that raises its little wooden arm; it imagines that it is making the movements it wants to make. Cain belongs to the irremediable, to that universe in which, as he himself says, "instead of acting and knowing we are acting, we know we are acted upon." He strikes out on paths already laid out which lead to the jail that has been prepared for him; meanwhile, his soul is a big poetic blank which widens at the edges: the more he strives to will the real, the more he fritters himself away in reveries. He must either disappear or transform himself.

It is precisely this new conflict which is going to save him. Without it, he went round in circles, unable to get out of the traps which he had set for himself. The liberating shock occurs when he realizes that he is dreaming, when he wonders perplexedly how his realism has changed into poetry, when he asks himself anxiously whether he is not going to be swallowed up, every bit of him, in the imaginary. For he immediately makes his second major decision: he will be *the* poet. Actually, this choice, which changes his life, involves nothing new: it is a reaffirmation of his original choice. He had decided to be what they had made of him; in striving to *be* a thief, he realized that he had become a *dreamer;* but his original will to assume himself entirely has not changed. Since dreamer there is, then dreamer he must will to be: he will be the thief become poet. Through this decision he escapes from the dream, since he transforms a dream of will into a will to dream; and above all, he finally acts upon himself: as a thief, he was lucky if he succeeded in verifying the forecasts of the good citizens; as a poet, he transcends them: this promotion will depend on him alone.

But let there be no misunderstanding: he is still far from being a writer. Evil remains his supreme end: he will first be a poet in his life, in his gestures, because this Poetry in act suddenly seems to him the best way of doing Evil and destroying being. He will be a poet because he is evil.